



Sacrifice by Nizhoni

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Summary: "Bill likes to believe he has a hard shell, kind of like a turtle. In spite of Robert's cruel fixation with him, he hasn't cracked. He's come close though, plenty of times. But then he remembers he's not alone in this. There are his friends, who he knows he has to keep safe." In a lonely cellar four boys fight for their lives against the sadistic child predator, Mr. Robert Gray.

1. Chapter 1

A/N PLEASE READ: Hi readers, I'd just like to point out that this story is a Pennywise Human AU, meaning Pennywise's real name is Mr. Robert "Bob" Gray (as stated in the novel). It is based on the "IT" 2017 character portrayals. Also, this story is very DARK and will touch upon themes potential readers could find triggering including adult language, violence, child abuse, sexual abuse, rape (non-graphic) and torture. I do not wish to offend anyone with what I've written, and I hope you'll all heed my tags before proceeding. I don't normally write this kind of content, but I was rewatching "IT" the other night and the relationships between the core four really inspired the idea. Because this is currently a one-shot story, I've focused primarily on Bill, Richie, Eddie and Stan. However, there's a chance I may continue depending on how "Sacrifice," is received. So the other Losers could potentially show up in later chapters. Please let me know what you think by leaving a comment, giving a kudos and/or bookmarking. I really do appreciate the feedback and it'll help me determine whether or not to keep writing this. Thanks so much for reading guys!

Bill hears him first.

He wakes on the cellar floor, cold and stiff from his unsettled sleep when the footsteps echo in his ears. He sits up, suddenly alert and his attention shoots to the ceiling. With his chest pounding he follows the sound, watching for where the dust loosens from the rafters. Traces trickle down in murky grey path that's moving slowly but undoubtedly toward the cellar door.

Robert is back and he's on his way.

Bill wastes no time, as he shuffles feverishly across the floor to the first boy he can reach. Eddie is the closest to him, huddled against the wall with his knees pulled against his chest and his brows furrowed together. A hard line is cut between his eyes. It looks like he's having a nightmare and Bill almost doesn't wake him because no monster in Eddie's dreams is any comparison to the one awaiting him in the cellar.

But he places a sad, hesitant hand on Eddie's shoulder anyway, and shakes his friend awake, not wanting Robert to be the one to do it. When his eyes flutter open, Eddie knows right away. A quiet, "no," whispers from his lips and he scrunches his eyes shut, blinking out tears.

Bill squeezes his shoulder and the smaller boy straightens up, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. He takes a deep breath and helps Bill with the others.

Eddie wakes Richie and Bill wakes Stan. After that, the four boys are left standing in a dank, dripping corner of the cellar. They wait in dread and with baited breath for the man upstairs. It's only a matter of time, a few more steps before they'll hear the squeal of the cellar door.

"Well fellas, least he can only butt fuck one of us at a time, am I right?"

"Don't!" Stan snaps at Richie. He's stood against the wall; the farthest back out of any of them. Bill has never seen him look so pale. "Just don't, okay Richie?"

Richie doesn't know what to say, so he just looks at Eddie. Bill catches him doing this often, and he notices that for someone as tall as Richie, he sure does lean on Eddie a lot. He thinks it's because Eddie is Richie's crutch. He needs Eddie like he needs air. To function, for support and reassurance but most often then not, he needs Eddie to tell him when he's being a complete ass.

Eddie holds his stomach like he's hurting. With watery eyes, he shakes his head at Richie and mumbles "beep, beep."

Richie pierces his lips and lowers his gaze, feeling ashamed. Joking is how he copes. It's the only way he knows how to deal with any of this, but he forgets sometimes that he's not the only one suffering. Stan and Eddie still haven't been chosen yet. Though the threat is implicit. It's not a matter of *will* it happen, but *when*, and that thought alone is enough to render Stan a blithering wreck and send Eddie into another sick fit.

A creak resounds from atop the wooden steps and a sliver of light peaks through, broken by a looming shadow.

Stan is hiccupping beside him and Bill nudges his shoulder. When Stan turns to face him, he's a teary and snotty mess. Bill wants to say something, anything comforting but the words don't come. He settles with taking Stan's clammy hands in one of his, and Eddie's hand with the other. From Eddie's right, Richie also holds his hand and together they stand like an unbreakable chain.

Robert takes the first step, his steal-tow boots rasp against the ramshackle steps.

STEP. THUMP. CREAK.

Bill sneaks Richie a hard look from behind Eddie's shoulder, a thought passing between them.

I have to do something.

Richie agrees. He nods.

STEP. THUMP. CREAK.

They watch as Robert slides his palm along the bannister, tapping his fingers with an almost tauntingly feathered touch. The gesture makes Bill hate him more. He knows those hands, every callused and sharp edge of them, and they've never been gentle.

STEP. THUMP. CREAK.

Robert descends from the final step, dancing on his toes and to their dismay he's not wearing his costume. Instead he wears a white collared shirt, unbuttoned against his bare chest and pair of kaki slacks. Without the showboat of clown makeup, he seems completely ordinary.

Of course they know it's just another trick. They've learned the hard ways that with Robert looks are deceiving.

With his gaunt cheeks and swollen, snake-lipped smile, Robert feels even more like a villain than his painted counterpart, Pennywise.

Because Pennywise may be a deviant, he taunts the boys with news clippings of the other children, all the ones he's killed. He promises them they'll never see their families again. He entertains in the misery that besets them, chiselling at their souls and trying to tear them down with his mind games. But Robert Gray is depraved. He takes pleasure in making them squirm; in bruising them and in hearing them beg. He'll do just about anything to get the reaction he wants, and he'll do it with a smile.

When he comes to them as himself, they already know tonight will be horrible.

"My boys," Robert leers, breaking the silence with a voice that bubbles with excitement, "My beautiful, beautiful boys. I'm so sorry for not visiting these past few days." He brushes his wild, red hair from his face and takes a step toward them. They all stiffen. Robert doesn't fail to miss this. It enthuses him and he licks his lips as he trails his eyes across the line. He starts on a glaring Richie, and stops on Stan...too long on Stan.

Stan feels the man's eyes on him and he's losing it. Bill can sense it for himself. He squeezes Bill's hand so hard that he can actually feel his fingers going numb.

"Staaaaanley." Robert rocks his head from shoulder to shoulder. A deceptively sweet drawl dribbles from his lips. "Aren't you going to say hello?"

Stan gives a frantic shake of his head, "Yellow-billed cuckoo," he squeaks out. He pulls on his left ear, whispering a mantra they know all to well.

"Bay-breasted Warbler. Scarlett Tanager."

Where Richie has his jokes, Stan has his birds. He recites the ones he can remember from the bird book his father gave him when he was eight. Bill thinks it helps him escape. He imagines that he's back in the woods with his dad, the two of them spotting the birds together and definitely not here in the cellar where he's the only one being observed.

"Green-tailed Towhee. Purple Finch. American Pipit."

"Look at me Stanley."

"Lark Sparrow."

The boys feel helpless watching as Stanley begins to crumble. Names spew from his mouth, one by one with barely a breath between them. He looks like he might vomit but the words get in the way.

"Ruby-crowned Kinglet."

"Bawk..."

They turn suddenly to find Robert with his hands tucked under his armpits, shaping his arms into wings, "bawk."

Stan twists his ear even harder and shakes his head once more, trying to jangle Robert's taunts from his mind. "Bu-barn...Swallow."

"BAWK!" Robert croons. It's loud and shrill and it startles all of them. "BAWK! BAWK!"

He flaps his makeshift wings, and yells, "What about a chicken Stanny. Ain't you ever seen a chicken before?"

Stan lets out a whimper, staring at the ground. Tears trickle off his chin. He doesn't look up even as the silence presses on and the weight of Robert's presence hammers down on him.

Bill's jaw tightens. *Face him Stan. Come on, you have to face him.*

"Northern wheat-"

Robert smiles wider, "cause I'm looking at a clucking little chicken right now." He steps closer and that's all it takes. Stanley doesn't mean to, but he breaks the chain. He stumbles back in a bid to distance himself and falls. Bill feels the tug of his weight as he hits the ground and watches woefully as his friend hugs himself on the floor.

His thoughts trail back. *Do something!*

Robert snickers as he begins to close the distance between them, "and here I thought you'd miss me."

Bill is next to break the chain. He let's go of Eddie's hand. Eddie is a second too late trying to pull him back, and before Bill can even think about what he's doing, he steps in front of Robert, blocking his path.

"I mu-missed yu-you, Mr. Gray." He's disgusted by his own words, humiliated, but he manages to say the right thing because for now Robert's attention turns on him. With curious eyes he looks Bill up and down. "Is that right?"

Bill gives a weak nod. "Did yu-you mu-miss me too?"

Robert reaches a hand up to him, and it takes everything inside of Bill, all his willpower to plant his feet and stay put. But he wants to run. *God* he wants to run so badly.

"As a matter of fact..."

The man presses his palm on the side of Bill's face, rubbing the bud of his thumb over the dint in Bill's cheek, down onto his chin and back up over his lips. "I did."

Bill swallows, feeling his heart hammering back in his chest. He knows what the man wants and he parts his lips.

Robert smiles, pushing his thumb into Bill's mouth. Bill is contrite as he forces his brain to react, sucking the thumb in a way he remembers the man likes. He tries not to think about his friends, whom he knows are watching and are just as disturbed as he is.

He knows Robert takes a particular pleasure in tormenting him in front of the others. The Losers look up to Bill, not because he's bossy or high-handed, but because he's loyal, and brave and fiercely protective of them in a way no other person, not even their own parents have ever been.

Robert doesn't like this.

He considers Bill a threat and to a degree, Bill supposes he is. He can't physically challenge Robert in any way, the man doubles him in

his size and stature. But Bill is clever. He studies Robert on those horrible nights that he's forced to spend with him. By now he's gotten a pretty good understanding of how the man ticks and one thing is for certain, Robert feeds off the power. He does things and says things to try and belittle Bill all the time.

"Big Bill?" The man pants in his ear. He has Bill's face pressed in the sheets, pushing him down by his hair. He can hardly breath. "I wonder what they'd think of you now."

Bill likes to believe he has a hard shell, kind of like a turtle. In spite of Robert's cruel fixation with him, he hasn't cracked. He's come close though, plenty of times. But then he remembers he's not alone in this. There are his friends, who he knows he has to keep safe. They come first and foremost. He thinks he can use Robert's obsession to an advantage. No matter how messed up that might be, he'll have to be manipulative too. He doesn't want to lie down willingly, but he'll do what it takes to keep Robert from hurting one of his friends again.

He thinks of the first time Richie was taken instead of him. He tried to stop it. *Damn it*, he tried so hard. But Robert had been too strong, and Bill wasn't prepared. He watched Richie be dragged up those steps, kicking and screaming and he spent the entire night feeling every second of Richie's torture like it was his own.

He knows there's no way for him to change what's already happened, but he can try at least to keep the same thing from happening to Eddie and Stan. If he gives in and offers Robert everything he demands, if he allows this man to believe he's in complete control than Bill might have better chance of keeping the attention on himself.

"Takin' one for the team," is what his baseball coach would call it and he'd die for this team if he had to.

Robert takes his thumb out of Bill's mouth and pinches his chin. It feels warm, still wet with his saliva. "So eager to please, are we Billy Boy?"

He hates the way Robert talks down to him like he's enjoying this, like he's doing this for any other reason besides keeping the people

he cares about safe. Bill narrows his eyes, "Yes," he mutters through clenched teeth. "I-I want to go with yu-you."

"Well then," Robert grins at him. He squeezes Bill's chin harder, "I want to hear that again, like you mean it."

Bill wishes he could spit in the man's face, watch as his big yellow loogie dribbles down Robert's filthy sweat beaded forehead. He swallows, "Pu-please...ta-take me-

"Bill don't!"

He's interrupted before he can finish. He follows the voice, catching Richie's gaze from behind his coke bottles glasses. There's something so completely desperate there. "Don't do it."

Bill shakes his head, and snaps back. "Sh-shut it, Rich."

"You're Big Bill," Richie states, his voice firm and impassioned. "We know that. We know you can do anything...but not this. That doesn't mean you have to do this."

Bill's heart swells in his chest, coursing steaming blood through his veins. He's so damn angry with Richie right now. This isn't his job, why doesn't he understand that? Bill's the leader. He's the one who's supposed to protect them, not the other way around.

Richie, you have to let this happen! Hot tears well in Bill eyes. "Fucking beep, beep you idiot!"

Richie ignores him and steps forward.

Oh no.

"Hey Fuckwad!"

Robert drops his hand from Bill's chin. He tilts his head, eerily slow toward the glass-eyed boy with amusement and his lips quirk up. "What was that Richie?"

Richie stands his ground, clenching his fists. He could almost pass for intimidating, if his hands weren't shaking at his sides, and his eyes

weren't so swollen under his lenses. "If you're going to take anyone here, it uh...it might as well be the only one who has a big enough dick to handle it."

Richie is tugged back into place and for someone as small as Eddie he actually manages to pull Richie behind him. "What - are - you - doing?" Eddie gasps, his chest rises and falls with laboured breaths.

"Let me go Eds!"

"Stop it!" Eddie begs him, "Richie, you can't...not again-"

Tears stream down Eddie's face.

For a moment, Richie forgets he's being watched. With soft, concerned eyes, he places his hands on Eddie's face and gives him a gentle shake, "Eddie come on, please breath man."

It's a mistake, a huge fucking mistake. Bill catches Robert's eyes flit with delight and his heart plummets straight into his stomach because now more than ever, Robert has the upper hand. There's only one other thing he loves more than having power and that's collecting leverage.

Richie has just revealed his biggest weakness to a predator.

Bill sees what's coming next, and he grabs for Robert's arm before he can advance. Robert turns fast on his heels and backhands Bill across the face. The sound is piercing and echoes through the cellar with a *SNAP!* Bill falls to the floor with a dull thud. He lands beside Stan. His head spins. Stan crawls to his side, and pats his nose with a hesitant touch. His fingertips are red with Bill's blood, "You're nu-nose Bill...it's broken." Bill knocks his hand away. He has no time to worry about himself right now. With unsteady legs, he stumbles back to his feet.

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Richie sees it coming too late. He looks up when he hears the slap, and suddenly Robert is only two feet away from them and Bill is on the floor. He pushes Eddie into the corner and lunges. He catches Robert around the torso, but the man is like a cement wall. He

doesn't budge.

"He's certainly cute Richie and so wonderfully fragile." Robert grabs a handful of Richie's hair and yanks him upright. Richie hisses as Robert twists his grip and pulls his head back so they are cheek to cheek. "You think you can fix him, don't you?" He presses his chapped lips to Richie's ear and hisses hot breath as he whispers, "Not after I break him."

A growl of rage rips from Richie's throat and he jumps up, kicking off of the wall and sending them both careening backward.

Robert staggers, and missteps. They fall to the floor, and for a split second, Robert's grip on him loosens. Richie rolls sideways. He's on his hands and knees, crawling for freedom when Robert's hand tightens over his ankle. He's tugged back so fast; Richie completely flattens onto his stomach. The man drags Richie down till he's straddling him from behind, keeping him still between his knees.

"Get off me you fucking demon Carrot Top!"

Robert laughs, "You're funny Richie, so so funny." He grabs Richie's hand and pins his arms against his back. "Always with the jokes. Always entertaining. You sure do like a good show, don't you?" Richie doesn't like the inflection in his voice. He struggles even harder, especially when he hears Robert rifling through his pockets. When he catches sight of the man over his shoulder, there's a zip tie ready in his hand. "I know Eddie and I could put on greaaaat show for you."

The hairs on Richie's body stand upright. *No! No! No!* How did this happen? He was only trying to help Bill, and now he's made everything worse. A hundred fucking times worse! It was supposed to be him. Not Stan. Not Bill. Not Eddie. *Please god...not Eddie.*

Robert loops the zip tie around his wrists and finishes tightening it just before a flying force bulldozes into him. The man is sent tumbling off of Richie and onto the cement. It takes a moment for Richie to register what's happened and with dumbstruck eyes he realizes it's Bill. He's on top of Robert, and he's bringing down punches, left and right as fast as his skinny limbs can pummel.

"That's it Bill!" Richie encourages. Red drips from Bill's nose, and Richie's not sure if the blood that's on Robert's face is his or his friend's. He prays for the latter. "Beat that mother fuckers ass!"

The feeling of triumph is short lived. Robert is only thrown for a moment before everything takes a terrible turn. Robert's hand shoots forth and he catches Bill's clenched fist in his palm. It lands there with a residual *CLAP*. There's a second of silence. Bill stares down at the man, eyes wide and stricken. Robert smiles.

Oh shit...

Bill tries to pull free but it's no use. Robert twists his hand in a violent and sudden gesture and the boy cries out. Robert's other hand shoots up and captures his throat silencing him.

"No!" Richie shouts, he pulls against the bindings but they don't loosen and he's wagging on the floor like a useless dying fish.

Robert flips them over, so he's towering on top of Bill.

He simpers. "When are you going to learn?" Saliva drips from Robert's mouth as he leans his face close to Bill's, and squeezes his neck tighter. "There's no use in fighting me Billy Boy. You won't save them."

Bill kicks out. His eyes are bloodshot and full of tears. He's turning red, the same colour of Robert's hair; strands shroud over his face in a crimson veil.

Richie is helpless.

Like a superhero in yellow shorts, Eddie appears out of nowhere. He dashes past Richie and throws himself onto Robert's back. "Let go of him you asshole!" He's a determined little spitfire as he claws his fingers across the man's face.

A laugh of utter disbelief escapes Richie, *fragile my ass*. Richie wishes he could take Robert's words, shove them down the bastard's throat and watch him choke on them till he's dead. Never underestimate the Spaghetti Man.

Of course he's terrified seeing Eddie, *his Eddie* fending Robert off, but now's not the time to be selfish with his friends. Bill needs help and Eddie is all he has. Eddie and Stan.

Wait. Where the hell is Stan?

Richie turns his head and finds Stanley still trembling on the floor. Still crying where he sits. He can't believe this.

"Stan get up and help them, NOW!"

Stan covers his ears, and closes his eyes. He rocks back and forth, shaking his head.

"Stan! We need you!"

Eddie yelps, and Richie whips his head back around. Robert is on his feet. He has Eddie by the arm, dangling him up so that his sneakers barely kiss the ground. Bill lies at Robert's feet, a boot planted on his chest. The man steps down hard, pushing all his weight into Bill with a crushing force. Bill let's out a horrible, strangled wheeze. His flailing hands claw at Robert's leg, frantically attempting to push him off.

Eddie swings his leg and it catches Robert in the hip. The man sighs, as though dealing with a pesky fly, and he delivers a merciless punch to the small boy's face. The force sends Eddie's head whipping back. His eyes roll skyward.

Richie sees fire. "You son of a bitch! You fucking piece of shit!"

"These little acts of defiance are really starting to bore me."

Robert lifts his foot off of Bill's chest. Bill heaves, gasping and coughing. He's finally able to breath. Robert throws Eddie's limp body behind him and Eddie lands like dead weight onto the cement floor. Richie flinches when he does. Robert turns his attention back to Bill. He lifts his leg and kicks the toe of his boot into Bill's ribs. Bill cries out again, rolling across the floor and clutching his side.

"Stop it! Stop hurting him!"

Robert delivers another kick. "I like you so much better like this." He kicks. "Those pretty brown eyes blooming with bruises." He kicks. "That perfect pink skin painted in red."

"Stop you sicko!" Richie shouts with a raging desperation. "You're going to kill him!"

Robert Gray stops short of his next kick. He rests his foot back on the ground and peers down to the bloodied, crumpled mess at his feet. "Kill him?" A dark, dreadful chuckle escapes the man's lips. "I wouldn't dream..."

He pushes a foot into Bill's side and rolls the boy onto his stomach.

"Bill!" Richie calls out to him; he squirms on the floor and peers over to his battered friend. "Bill buddy, you in there?"

"Rrr-Rich...arrrrg!" Bill groans, as Robert climbs on top of him. He grabs Bill's hands and twists them behind him. He reaches in his pocket, pulling out another zip tie and fastens it around Bill's wrists.

"We still need an audience for our BIG SHOW!"

The man stands and grabs Bill's arm, dragging him across the room. He drops Bill in front of Stanley and pulls out another zip tie. Stan finally looks up. He meets Robert eyes with a faraway gaze that so completely shattered that the man doesn't even bother. Robert winks at him and places the zip tie back in his pocket. He comes for Richie next, sauntering over and does the same, dropping him on the floor beside his friends. They huddle together. Richie feels Bill's hand slip back into his.

In a quiet corner across the room, Eddie stirs. A weak moan escapes his lips.

"It looks like our little star is up," Robert chuckles at Richie. His lips rise in a vile smirk that slices all the way across his face. Thin scratches bleed down his forehead and frame his feral eyes. He's a complete, and total monster.

Richie breaks when Robert strides across the room, straight for Eddie. Heavy, hitching sobs twist in his stomach and tear apart his throat.

He knows this is his fault and there's no amount of begging, no snap backs, or clever insults that can stop Robert from doing every horrible thing imaginable to his best friend...the only boy he loves.

Eddie starts screaming and Richie shuts his eyes. *"I'm sorry Eds. I'm so fucking sorry."*

2. Chapter 2

A/N: High readers, I'd first like to thank anyone who took the time to read the first chapter and for the support! I'd also like to point out that this story will only get darker from here on out. This chapter, though not explicitly so, will be a touch more graphic than the last and therefore PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE read with caution. Trigger warning for sexual abuse and rape in this chapter. Let me know what you think by leaving a comment and let me know if you'd like to see more. Thanks guys!

Chapter Two: Eddie

Eddie has never been more scared in his life.

Actually...no, that felt like way to grave an understatement to describe this. Because, Eddie is scared of a lot of things. Like using public restrooms, or shaking hands with strangers, or having to sit on the lap of that creepy guy who plays Santa at the mall every Christmas. Oh, and let's not forget the most obvious of all, Henry - fucking - Bowers.

Though even Henry, with his menacing mullet and knife threats seems like small beans when compared to Robert Gray, who fill's Eddie with a kind of terror so beyond anything he's ever experienced.

What he feels now, it is immeasurable.

He is stripped and splayed on the cement floor exactly how Robert wants him. A fist in his hair and nails dug deep, piercing into the soreness of his hip. Wet lips dance across his bare shoulder and Eddie shivers as the man presses his nose into the nape of his neck. Robert inhales, loud and pleased as he jerks Eddie's his head in the direction of the others. They can't see him, *thank god*. They've shut their eyes in a daring act of defiance and he's grateful, because at least they won't witness what comes next. He can't live with knowing they were forced to watch.

He looks between them. All three.

There's Bill...*Big Bill*, his oldest friend in the world. He looks so unlike himself, a mess of the boy Eddie considers their leader. His face is broken and his ego is bruised. It hurts Eddie simply by looking at him. He fought so hard and sacrificed so much for them. Though, for Robert it's never been enough and Bill has always had to give more than the rest. Eddie will never be able to make that up to him.

He looks to Stan, by far the most affable of them all. He is cowered numbly behind Bill and Richie and Eddie thinks, Stan has never done anything to deserve this. His record is clean, spotless actually. The perfect son, if there ever was one. Stan eats his vegetables without fuss, he makes straight A's and he visits his nana bubbie every weekend at the nursing home without being asked. Not just that, Stan has always been willing to stand for what's right. Right now, he doesn't look like he can stand for anything, even if he tried.

And Richie, *god* Richie might be the actual death of him, because the boy he is looking at now is such a far cry from the boy he knows.

Richie laughs louder and more obnoxiously than any person Eddie has ever met. "*Who cares if people are staring Eds! What does it matter?*" It didn't matter. It doesn't matter. Eddie knows that now. He embarrasses the hell out of Eddie, calling him by those infuriating nicknames, all "*Ed's*" and "*Eddie-Spaghetti*" and "*Spaghetti Man*," goading Eddie till he's snapping at Richie to "*Stop calling me that! You know I hate that!*" Richie cracks lame jokes in terrible accents that only Eddie seems to understand. It has the other Losers looking to him for translation and it makes him feel special, like he and Richie share their own secret language.

He knows Richie Tozier better than anyone else does on this entire planet, and it feels strange to see the regularly snappy and go-lucky spirit of his best friend escaping him in tears.

"Please, just let him go! For fuck sake Mr. Gray, I'll do anything!" He pleads for Eddie's sake, drowning the room in sobs that resound between the concrete walls in an amalgam of noise full of misery and sadness, and in a way so unlike Richie that it breaks Eddie's heart to watch.

This is wrong, all of it. It's like they're trapped in some kind of

bizarro nightmarish reality where nothing is as it should be. Each of them, in one way or another has lost a piece of themselves here in the cellar.

Eddie wonders what he'll lose.

"Eddie..." He hears Bill sputter, "Eddie, I-I..." He loses his words, filling the space between their heartbeats with a doleful silence.

Eddie swallows the lump in his throat. "I know," he manages to pipe out, even with the weight of Robert's body pressing into his. They did what they could, by protecting him for as long as they could, and Eddie knows that.

Richie snivels and when Eddie looks back over, he lifts his head almost like he wants to stare back. Richie's eyes sway behind his closed lids in a frantic manner that threaten to open and catch Eddie's gaze. Though he won't risk it. He scrunches his lids tighter, forcing out new tears. He doesn't look, but he listens and that is all Eddie needs.

He doesn't care that Robert will hear him. He takes a deep breath and shouts aloud, "THIS - IS - NOT - YOUR - FAULT!"

It's meant for all of them but his eyes remain on Richie. He hopes his voice will follow, because more than anything he needs Richie to understand that he doesn't blame him for what's about to happen.

Robert smacks his head powerfully into the dull cement and Eddie grunts. For a moment he's lost in the haze, and he's guided back only after the earsplitting ring has dulled in his ears. He blinks the floating dots out of his vision and squirms beneath Robert.

The man clicks his tongue scoldingly, "Oh Eddie, it's really not very nice to lie to your friends."

A sizzling flame of fury sparks inside him. "Shut up!" Eddie screeches back, and he's honestly not sure where this newfound boldness is coming from, or how long it will stand. But he refuses to allow Robert to use him as a means of getting inside their heads. "You don't matter! None of this does. Nothing you say matters!"

With a demanding strength, Robert pushes Eddie's face into the floor, and keeps him there. Eddie has no where else to turn. His eyes flit about the cold, flat surface beneath him. His mind works a million maddening miles a minute, as he takes in the stained and grime speckled ground that he's laid upon. A sick, twisty stomach feeling begins to build inside him.

For a moment he wonders, *"is this floor really as filthy as it looks?"* And then he's mentally chastising himself, thinking, *"Priorities Kaspbrak! You've got bigger fucking problems right now!"*

Robert Gray has him pinned down, ready to do god knows what. Yet all Eddie can think about is his bare skin and all the questionable things that are probably seeping into his pores at this very moment.

Robert slides his palm with a slow and invading pressure, up and down Eddie's leg and then he hugs Eddie under his stomach. Goosebumps pucker on Eddie's skin. "Don't!" he gasps, trying to stay calm and failing terribly the moment Robert wanders lower. His heart races. "Please...please, just don't touch me!" He tries to push the man's hand away and Robert seizes his wrist, squeezing tightly.

"Don't do that again," Robert warns him, darkly and with a voice like venom. Eddie whimpers and Robert let's go. His hand drops back into place and he doesn't dare try a second time.

It happens when Robert Gray touches him *there*; that is when Eddie's loses all his resolve and with it, any fleeting remnants of his innocence and childhood. He presses his forehead against the concrete, shuts his eyes and cries as Robert uses him. The man gropes Eddie, pumping his large hand between the boy's legs, in rhythmic strokes that somehow have Eddie's body betraying itself. Eddie feels a tickling energy collecting in his stomach, and pulsing its way to his crotch. It's a familiar and yet completely foreign feeling, because he's only ever done this by himself, and while locked in the privacy of his bedroom.

Though, even those times felt wrong. When trying what he could to keep his thoughts focused on the painted up women in his mother's Cosmo magazine, their supposed sexy tits and long legs and lipstick did nothing for him. Eddie would always find himself tossing the

magazine across the room, because, *why even bother?* He knew exactly where...or more specifically *who* his thoughts would end up on.

Eddie Kaspbrak loses himself always, to dark curls that never get brushed and brown eyes that sparkle behind glasses that catch the sun. And to thin lips that are shaped like pink candy - and that Eddie thinks would taste wonderfully sweet if they weren't always spouting that sour sense of humour.

He can't believe Robert can elicit the same physical reaction in him that his fantasies for Richie can, even while against his own will. He is so utterly disgusted by it all. He tells himself that they're not the same, and that he doesn't want this. Except with each torturous stroke Eddie is being drawn to his tipping point, much like those times in his bedroom. It has him questioning himself and the feelings he harbours for his best friend, which now feel impure and perverse.

His body starts to spasm, filling him with a heated pressure that aches to be released. He will never forgive himself for what he knows is going to happen.

"Be a good boy," Robert murmurs to him sickly sweet, "Stop trying to fight it." The worse part is, he can't fight. Not anymore. Eddie groans, pounding his fist into the ground, as Robert finishes him with a final insistent squeeze. He cums in the man's hand feeling dirty and ashamed, wondering if he'll ever be clean again.

"You're shaking," Robert teases him, relishing in the response Eddie is giving him. He continues to rub Eddie through the aftershock of his orgasm, eliciting more sharp tremors through his small body. He's so painfully sensitive right now, he can barely stand Robert's continued abuse.

"Pu-please...just stop."

"Oh but we can't stop now," Robert says, in a virulent voice that drips with lust, "you're doing so well!" He pauses his strokes, and Eddie gasps at the release. He listens unwillingly as the man brings the abusing hand to his own lips. Robert licks his fingers and moans, "hmmm, tasty tasty."

Eddie wishes a black hole would open up and swallows him whole - just end it for him right then and there. He is sick to his stomach, fighting the bile that churns inside him and threatens to spew. He doesn't think he can take much more. He's been humiliated and violated worse than he ever imagined. He's unsure how Robert can make this any worse for him, but he's certain the man will find a way.

"You got what you wanted!" Eddie chokes out, his entire body is wracked by sobs, "Wha-what more is there for you-you to take?"

Robert laughs, a low and menacing laugh as he tightens his grip in Eddie's hair, and forces him to once again face the corner where his friends are huddled.

"They won't even look at you," Robert whispers tauntingly and when Eddie looks again, he sees the anguish and defeat stricken upon each of their faces. He knows in that moment, this punishment was never intended to be just for him.

"If they won't look..." Robert lifts his weight for a moment to rest his right knee between Eddie's thighs and forces his legs apart. "We're just going to have to make a louder impression!"

He hears Robert unzipping himself and the realization of what's about to happen sends a new wave of terror surging through Eddie. It's like ice cold blood coursing through his veins. He suspected this is what Robert had planned all along, but the actual reality of his predicament becomes all too much for Eddie to handle. He's not strong like his friends. He won't be able to survive this!

"NO!" Eddie screams, bucking beneath Robert. He struggles, as hard as he can, kicks his heels up, and swears, desperately and angrily at the man on top of him. "Stop! You can't fucking do this!"

Robert quietly chortles in amusement, "So strong for such a little thing." He leans back down to drag his mouth over Eddie's skin and nips at Eddie's ear, "Any other surprises?"

The panic is all consuming and it tightens inside of Eddie's lungs. He pants in and out in short, laboured spouts of air that have him

trembling where he lays. A painful pressure gathers between his ears. He thinks he might pass out, a big part of him hopes he does. Though of course, he's never been that lucky. Robert readies himself, and for the first time in a long time, Eddie can only comprehend one thing, "I need my inhaler!"

...

It was the same day of Georgie's seventh birthday. Eddie had been at Keene's pharmacy that morning, trying to choose a birthday card for the party. He actually spent ten whole minutes looking over the greeting card wrack, and taking in the lack of fuzzy and feathered little characters in his \$1.00 price range. Finally he settled for blue pop up card with a smiling purple duck on the cover.

"Have a Quacking Birthday - Feather Brain"

Okay, so maybe it wasn't the best greeting, but it wasn't like he had a whole lot of options to work with here. Between the sparkly kitten cards and that strange, googly-eyed chimpanzee, it felt like he made the right decision. Besides, kids liked ducks, right? And Georgie liked sailing, so Eddie supposed the aquatic bird was a good mascot in this case.

He'd already accepted that the card would also be from Richie, considering the knucklehead never seemed to remember to bring his own. When he walked up to the counter ready to pay, Mr. Keene reminded him that his refills were ready to pick up. So Eddie waited while the man retreated to the back room to go retrieve them. Greta, Mr. Keene's daughter, was sitting behind the counter smacking her chewing gum and darting her eyes between the pages of a "TEENAGE!" magazine. She was in the same grade as Eddie and had a reputation as a "bag girl" bully around their school. Though thankfully, she'd never really paid him much interest, and the two only ever interacted a few times back in sixth grade. It was when she'd annoyingly decided against Bill's will that she had a crush on him, and that he was her boyfriend now.

Yes, those were her exact words.

Of course Bill Denbrough was to polite for his own good. It still surprised Eddie that he'd had enough patience to deal with Greta following him around for a full two weeks. Heck, he might have even married Greta one

day, had she not decided to call Richie out on wearing the same "tacky" Hawaiian shirt to much, and "don't you ever wash your clothes Tozier?"

The first thing to understand is that Richie and his parents had encountered a wallop of financial setbacks that year. His dad Wentworth was laid off from his position at the Foundry, and his mother Maggie had been working long hours at the Derry Grocer just to make ends meet. Even still, with all her extra shifts the Tozier's were barely scraping by. So it wasn't uncommon for Richie to spend his nights with the Denbrough's whenever his family couldn't pay their bills.

Though, sometimes Richie's pride and embarrassment overruled his better judgement. He didn't always tell his friends when the water was suddenly turned off in his home, or if the power went out, or even when he hadn't eaten much of anything in the past few days. It often took them noticing the tell tale signs, like catching Richie napping in class, or picking the scraps from their lunches or god forbid, wearing the same shirt four days in a row, for him to finally accept their help.

The second thing to understand is that no one, not even the meanest girl in school (and his girlfriend...kinda?) could get away with treating Bill Denbrough's friends like shit.

Greta's comment was the bottom brick pulled from an already crumbling foundation and it was enough to make Bill's resolve finally come tumbling down. He turned on his heels, pointed his finger right into Greta's chubby face, and shouted loud enough for the entire school yard to hear, "Greta Keene, you are the worst person I've ever met! Stay away from me and my friends, for good!"

And just like that Greta's clingy crush on Bill had come to a very abrupt halt and thankfully with it, all the elaborate ploys to insert herself into his life. There were no more flirty classroom gazes, or air kisses in the hallways or secret love notes shaped like hearts and other cute little things being found in Bill's desk. And thankfully it wasn't just Bill who dropped off her radar. Following their not so smooth and anything but mutual break up, Greta Keene had avoided the entire club of Loser's all together.

In fact, for much of eighth grade they were practically invisible to her.

Which was why Eddie was so completely surprised to find Greta staring

over the service counter right at him.

He glanced around quickly, just to make sure Greta wasn't staring at someone behind him. Since no one was in sight, he turned around and found her eyes still trained in his direction. The magazine she'd been reading was now abandoned in her lap. She crossed her arms, tilted her head and smiled.

"Hi?" Eddie said nervously. He hadn't had much experience with other girls besides Beverly, and this one was...well she was just downright freaky.

"Eli right?"

"Uh...Eddie, actually."

Greta waved her hand dismissively, "right, whatever. Sorry." She blew another rubbery pink bubble and popped it between her teeth. "You know what's fun about having a daddy who owns a pharmacy Eli?" Greta chewed with her mouth open, loudly and messily.

"Wha-what?" Eddie questioned, feeling strange that the two were even having this conversation, and also noticing a dollop of spit pinched in the corners of Greta's lips

Gross.

"I get to hear about all the crazy, disgusting, weird shit the people of Derry like to keep secret!"

Eddie tensed. He had the faintest suspicion that there was hidden implication in what she might be saying to him. Though weary to play along with what was obviously a very fun game for Greta, he couldn't shake the nagging curiosity inside him. He found himself leaning in. His chest pressed over the breadth of the counter and he whispered hesitantly, "like what?"

Wow!" She answered with mischievous laugh that tickled in the girl's throat. "You really have no clue, do you?"

Greta Keene was more than alighted to inform Eddie Kaspbrak that his entire life had been a lie up until that very moment. Because, his so called

medication was in fact "bullshit,"and that Eddie was not sickly by any means. It was all a ruse, a twisted ploy of his mother's making. A way to keep Eddie nipping at her heels like a scared and lost little puppy. For thirteen long years she'd kept the deceit going; training him by the hour by filling his mind with false tales and peppering his insides with gazeboes! Eddie being the naive and perfectly obedient son that he was, had never suspected for a second that his mother whom he loved more than anyone else in the world, could actually betray him like that.

He'd been so angry and so beyond any kind of reasoning when he'd confronted her that afternoon. What's worse is she never even tried to deny it. Instead she just pummelled him with a whole new string of assurances, "they help you Eddie bear!"

All he could think to do was look for an escape. In a frantic haste he stuffed only the bare essentials into his school bag (his toothbrush, a pack of Oreos and a change of underwear). He stormed straight out his front door, away from the prison he'd called home for thirteen long years, and still with his mother's desperate calls chasing after him.

"Edddddie! Don't do this to me Eddie!"

He ran, as fast as he could to Bill's house, where he knew his friends would already be. He told them the whole story and together they watched as he flushed those ill-prescribed pills down the bathroom toilet, ceremonial style with Richie playing air trumpet in the background. Eddie had never felt more empowered and so completely relieved to be free of those red and white capsules that were as heavy as anchors and working to weigh him down his whole life.

Though he hadn't completely ridden himself of his mother's deception. There was still her biggest lie to address. That being, his inhaler.

He'd barely gone a full day without using it since he was first "diagnosed" with asthma eight years ago. He was only five then, and he'd kept the dispenser safely zipped against his little waste ever since. After all those years, the inhaler felt like a part of him and now he had no idea how to detach himself from the little hunk of plastic or his utter reliance for it.

He was scared - of making a huge mistake - of having another asthma attack - of dying alone in some ditch without his inhaler - because he'd

foolishly thrown it away - just because he was angry - and now he was getting what he deserved - since he should have never run away - and now, oh god now his tombstone was going to read something so completely embarrassing: "Here lies Eddie Kaspbrak. He should have listened to his mommy."

"Eddie!"

Eddie startled back to his senses, to find his friends waiting on him expectantly. They were in Bill's back yard, stood by the white picket fence that separated the Denbrough home from a dense patch of thorn bushes and poison thistle on the other end. They learned that one year, when Georgie had thrown his favourite plush toy, a turtle named Maturin, over the top of the fence and they'd unwittingly jumped over to retrieve it. Despite his ordeal, Maturin was relatively unscathed. Though the same could not be said for Eddie, or the others.

When he got home, Eddie had barely made it through the front door before being hustled back out again and carted straight to the emergency room. It didn't matter that he'd tried to explain to his mother that the marks were only poison thistle and no, he hadn't caught a viral infection from those "dirty little friends of his." She kept him home from school for almost an entire month before the principal finally called, and she'd been forced to send him back.

...

So there he stood, staring up at the fence with his small orange fanny pack still clenched in his hand and his inhaler zipped securely inside. Eddie squeezed the bag tighter and shook his head as he turned to the others.

"Guys, I don't think I can do this."

Bill and Stan glanced between each other, neither certain about pushing him.

"Yu-you already took a big sta-step today, with the pu-pills," Bill said, trying to sound supportive.

"Yeah," Stan chimed in, "Maybe...umm, maybe you don't have to tackle everything all at once."

This should have made Eddie happy.

With their blessing, he could go on just as he always had, traversing the safe and steady path he was so used to. He wouldn't have to worry about making the wrong decision. Not as long as he could still hold onto his inhaler. Eventually, when he felt right and ready with his decision...that's when he'd finally get rid of it.

Problem was, Eddie didn't think he'd ever be ready and apparently neither did Richie.

"You gotta be shitting me with this right now?" From behind his magnified glasses, his eyes were big and boggling. "Am I the only one here who hasn't forgotten that Eds' doesn't actually have asthma?" He barrelled his way between Stan and Bill, poking his finger into Eddie's shoulder, "You are getting rid of it, TODAY."

Eddie stared up at him, eyes narrowed and cheeks burning with anger. "You don't get it!" He snapped back. He couldn't believe Richie all people couldn't understand his hesitation. "This isn't like the pills okay, I...I need this."

"No, you don't need it Eds. You never did. That's why we're all here isn't it? So why the hell are you still holding onto that inhaler like it's your fucking life line?"

He flexed his grip and opened his fingers, staring down at the pack that rested there in his swelling palm, "I'm not."

"You were, actually."

Eddie shook his head defiantly.

Eddie..." He spoke with a gentle fondness that dissolved the anger in an instant and somehow calmed the beat of Eddie's unsteady heart. "I get why you're scared, but that inhaler...it doesn't define you. Only you can do that."

Eddie felt his heart skip at Richie's words. The moment only lasted a split second before he was right back to being an ass all over again.

"So listen ere' mate-"

"Oh no!" Eddie groaned, "Not the British Guy, please."

"Oi hush now! You know you luv it." He stepped forward, placing his hands on Eddie's shoulders, "I say this for yur own good, and because em' two wankers don't 'ave the bullocks to hurt your feelings-

"Hey!" Stan interjected, "Wait...what did he call us?"

Richie laughed, "Don't go hurtn' yur brain Staniel, ole' chap." He dropped the accent and turned back to Eddie. With one hand he pushed his glasses onto his forehead so he could look at Eddie, really and truly look at him. His gaze felt penetrative as he stared hard into Eddie uncertain eyes. "If you don't do this today, your mom wins. She'll never consider you anything but her weak little..." He stopped again, to make grabby fingers at Eddie, pitching is voice higher to sound like a decrepit old woman, "Eddddie Bear."

Eddie gave a frustrated huff, slapping Richie's hands away. "My mom doesn't sound like that."

"Yeah well...we can agree to disagree on that one," He pointed at the fanny pack, "As long as you have that inhaler, she can keep using it to control you."

Eddie's stomach curled at the thought, "I'm not weak."

"Look," Richie stated, "You don't have to tell me that, I'm not the one who needs convincing here."

Bill spoke next. "I ca-can't believe I'm su-saying this," he came back to stand beside Richie in support, "bu-but, Richie mu-might actually have a pu-point." He elbowed Richie endearingly in the side, and smiled at Eddie. It was soft smile. The kind that filled Eddie with tender sort of confidence, like Bill already knew he was going to be alright. "You're rrr-really a lot st-stronger than yu-you give yourself cr-credit."

Richie threw his hands up in the air, and rolled his eyes in exasperation, "Now he says something!"

The corners of Eddie's lip rose, marring his expression with a nervous and shy smirk, "You think so?"

"We know so," Stan added. He too stepped forward, nodding at Eddie assuredly. "We should have just said it from the start."

Eddie glanced between the fence and his friends.

"The real question is..." Richie bent his knees and crouched, meeting Eddie's lowered and anxious gaze from beneath his darkened lashes. "Do you know it?"

...

Eddie knew it.

"Chuck it!" Richie shouted. He grinned an apple cheeked grin, so full of excitement and gusto, "Do it Eds!"

Eddie licked his lips, stepped back and trained his arm behind him, angling for the perfect throw.

"CHUCK IT! CHUCK IT! CHUCK IT!" His friends joined in, pumping their wild fists into the air with a chorus of chants. Emboldened by their roaring encouragements, and with their voices drowning out any lingering doubt in his mind, Eddie Kaspbrak threw his fanny pack away. It rolled in the air and fell back to earth, disappearing somewhere behind the fence where it would remain, forgotten and forever guarded by the poison shrubbery behind Bill's house.

When all was said and done, the others were quick to crowd him, slapping him on the back and ruffling his hair like three annoyingly proud friends would. Richie through an arm over his shoulder and mimicked the voice of a 1930's radio jockey, "Eddie Kaspbrak has just done the unthinkable! That's right folks, he threw that inhaler right into the stratosphere...and boy did that puppy fly!" He stuck an invisible microphone under Eddie's chin, "So tell us Eds, how did it feel?"

"Don't call me that," Eddie said pushing himself free from Richie's hold. He giggled as he straightened his tousled curls. "But I'll admit, that did feel pretty great."

"There you have it! Straight from the source, you heard it here first ladies and germs. Eddie Kaspbrak is a changed man!"

"Urrrg!" Stan groaned loudly, "Richie will you cut it out already. You're giving me a headache—"

"Oh well in that case, Doctor Tozier recommends the only cure for a headache...a healthy dose of vitamin R."

"That's not a thing."

"Of course it is, bend that cute little rump over the picnic table and I'll give you your first injection."

"Fuck you, your disgusting."

"Alright gu-guys, come th-that's enough," Bill chuckled, putting a temporary lapse in their banter and capturing back their attention. "The pa-party is at one, and I ta-told my mmm-mum that we'd help with the decorations."

"Do you always put your friends to work Bill?"

"Only the one's who decide to sh-sh-show up fff-four hours bu-before the damn pa-party Rrrr-Richie."

"When are the others getting here?" Stan asked curiously.

"Mike's gonna finish su-some chores around the fff-farm, but he'll bike over when he's done. And Bev said her aunt wu-will drop her off later tu-tonight." He didn't skip a beat as he continued. "So there's su-some streamers in the kitchen..."

The three remaining friends exchanged a quick look, catching on Bill's abrupt change of subject. They crossed their arms and with expectant stares, they waited stubbornly for Bill to drop the charade and stop avoiding the obvious.

He swallowed under their scrutinous gazes, "Su-so we better get st-started then..."

"Bill—" Eddie tried.

"Stan and Richie ca-can work on th-the streamers—"

"Bill—" implored Stan.

"Eddie and I ca-can wrr-work on the ta-tables."

"BILL!" They all shouted and that finally caught him. Bill fell silent, tensing his jaw and sighing through his nostrils with frustration. He pursed his lips, "I du-don't know if he's cu-coming, okay."

"Well did you invite him?" Richie asked annoyed.

"Of course I did. He doesn't wa-wa-want to ssss-see me."

"This is dumb," Stan said bitterly, "Why can't you two just talk about it."

"Well Wh-what do you th-think I've been tr-trying to do Stan!"

Eddie sighed, walking over and placing his hand on Bill's arm. When Bill looked up, something was vacant in his eyes, and Eddie had the sneaking suspicion it had everything to do with him missing Ben.

"He-he'll come around," Eddie added dolefully. "Ben's never been one to hold a grudge. And besides, it was just play. S'not like you and Bev kissed for real."

Bill's gaze fell and he seemed suddenly interested in kicking the dirt at his toes. "Yeah st-stage kiss...th-that was all."

"Boys!" Bill's mother called from the back porch. She was stumbling on her toes, holding a big box of party hats and noise makers, "I could really use your help here!"

Bill spared Eddie a sad glance before rushing off to help his mom. Richie huffed wistfully, coming to stand beside Eddie, "Think they'll patch things up?"

Eddie nodded, turning to Richie, "They're best friends. They have to."

"Not every friendship is as perfect as ours Eds."

Eddie choked out a laugh, "We're far from perfect."

"I beg to differ. As far as ideal friendships go, we're right up there with

Turner and Hooch."

"You know one of them is a dog right?"

Richie smiled, patting Eddie on the head condescendingly, "and you're such a smart wittle boy for figuring that out. Yes you are! Yes you are!"

Eddie rolled his eyes. He reached up and caught Richie's hand. Richie laughed, making a move to tug himself free but Eddie held on. Their smiles faltered and their clasped hands fell into the space between them. Richie swallowed, "Eds...?"

Eddie had no idea what he was doing. He rubbed Richie's knuckles with his thumb, they were rough and knobby but in a way that felt familiar and unique to Richie. Eddie liked the feeling. He wanted to hold Richie's hand for every day from now into eternity.

Eddie's mouth was as dry as sand paper, "Thank you." He looked up and Richie was staring back, eyes nervous and curious at the same time. "I really needed that." His heart was warm as he spoke, "you kinda saved me today."

Richie's breath hitched in his throat. He squeezed Eddie's hand and smirked shyly. Eddie could swear there was a flush to Richie's cheeks, and he wondered what that could mean. "Eddie, you always had it in you."

"I know, but you saw it in me first."

They were interrupted as Stan cleared his throat, coming up behind them with a box of streamers. "Hey there love birds! Can you stop flirting for five minutes to help us with the decorations?"

Eddie was truly going to murder Stan.

"There are some balloons in the kitchen. Think you two can handle that?"

Dead and buried Stan. Dead and buried.

Richie sighed and called over his shoulder, "Aye, aye Captain!" He winked at Eddie and they headed off. But not before Stan spared Eddie a final, "You're in love with that?" look, as Richie made a show of cartwheeling into the house before him. Richie headed straight for the balloons,

shovelling a bags of blow up balloons into his arms just as Mrs. Denbrough entered from the hallway.

"Oh Richie sweat heart, please don't use those all up. We'll need to save a few for the clown."

The bags slapped back to the floor, falling from Richie's arms in an instant. His face went pale. "Clown?...Du-did you say clown?"

"Yes dear, we hired a clown." Sharon Denbrough grinned, clapping her hands together excitedly, "Penny...something. Oh, I'm sure the kids will love him."

She walked out the sliding back doors, off to set the paper plates and leaving the two of them standing alone in the kitchen.

Eddie spared Richie a concerning look, "You alright Rich?"

"No one said anything about a fucking clown," Richie grumbled, bending down to salvage the pile of balloons he had dropped on the floor.

Eddie frowned, bending down beside him to help. Richie's hands trembled and Eddie didn't hesitate as he placed his hand over Richie's. "It's okay," he said quietly. Richie closed his eyes, breathing deep. "It's okay Rich."

A moment or two passed between them and when Richie finally opened his eyes, they were full of tears. He spared Eddie a shaken smirk, and shook his head embarrassed. "I'm sorry..."

"Hey" Eddie said, solemn and softly; he smiled at Richie, picking their hands up from on the floor, to press Richie's palm against his chest, "I can protect you."

3. Chapter 3

It's the kind of sound that shakes Stanley to his core—a cacophony of painful, jarring pleas that collect in Eddie's throat and transform violently into a fit of lasting screams. Strangely, they remind Stan of fireworks; like a blaring compendium of frantic sparks, whistling and colliding in the sky, only to erupt in a tumultuous shower seconds later.

He remembers something just then, something he'd rather forget. Sharp blue eyes shooting daggers right at him and a word that sifts listlessly through the blind fog of his thoughts. That word punctures a small piece of his soul.

Coward.

The memory bleeds into place.

...

In hindsight, taking a short cut through the woods alone may not have been one of Stanley's best ideas. In the pitch-black of night, he tried to make sense of the route to Mike's, but his nerves were starting to prove problematic in the dark. The brittle rustle of leaves, and the whine of dead pines, paired like the disgruntled call of a lurking tree monster. Obviously, Stan was too old to believe in those sorts of things, they were just not empirically possible. Though, that didn't stop him from checking over his shoulder every few steps—just to make certain he wasn't being followed.

He wished he hadn't left home in such haste, practically hightailing his way out the front door before thinking to grab a flashlight; but he wanted to escape the barbecue before his parents had time to change their minds. It was the Fourth of July and his father Donald was hosting for the entire synagogue. Picture that—a backyard crammed full of Derry's entire Jewish congregation. It was about as fun as one might expect, and Stan had wanted nothing more than to ditch the whole affair and spend the day goofing off with the Losers.

Unfortunately being the only son of the Rabbi meant he needed to uphold a certain level of responsibility. Not only was it customary for him to

make an appearance, but he also had to make a good impression. This usually meant he'd spend a great deal of the night, standing compliantly at his father's side, being carted from one picnic table to the next, shaking hands with a bunch of clammy palmed adults that felt the need to prod at Stanley any chance they could get.

"You are such a handsome boy," Mrs. Shepard, an elderly woman who reeked of mothballs and peppermint, had cooed for the third time that evening. She had onset Dementia, and Stanley was trying hard not to squirm as she reached her fingers toward him and snagged his cheek yet again in her surprisingly iron-vice grip. The bowtie Stan wore around his neck was too tight, chafing red into his delicate skin. Even still, he raised his chin to meet the lady who insisted so pressingly to hold his cheek hostage. He couldn't do much else, not when his father stood beside him, his palm cupped securely atop Stan's shoulder.

Thankfully, his mother came to his rescue. She'd been observing him throughout the night, and had noticed his discomfort mounting with every passing minute. Even with a charming smile, evenly plastered on his face, Stanley could do little to shadow his feelings where his mother was concerned. To her he was an open book, and the story she was reading was a sad one. She took him by the arm and jimmied him free of the old woman's hold. "Stanley sweetheart," she whispered discreetly in his ear, "go call Bill. See if they've left."

Stan hesitated, looking between his parents, uncertain of what to do. His dad took notice, and his expression twisted into a frown. He tugged Stan against him and excused himself with Mrs. Shepard. He leaned into his wife, "Andrea, what do you think you're doing?" His tone was riddled with umbrage, "We've discussed this, and he's staying right here—

"Donald, can't you see he's miserable. It's the Fourth of July. He should be spending tonight with his friends, not a bunch of old busy bodies." She gave Stanley a wink and he smiled small, grateful to have his mother in his corner. "There's no sense in arguing with me darling," and she crossed her arms, signalling that her mind was made up. His parents stared into each other for a few stressed moments before his father eventually relented.

He huffed, rubbing his temples and nodding curtly. "Fine then," His attention spun to Stanley, and his eyes were dangerously stern as he

muttered, "behave." Then he returned to his guests, leaving Stanley and his mother alone.

"Don't worry about him," she said, pinching Stan's nose playfully and giving it a small waggle, "just have fun." Stanley kissed her on the cheek, making a mental note to thank her later, as he scurried into the house to call the others.

It was Richie who picked up on the third ring, "Denbrough Taxidermy—you hack it, we pack it."

"Does Mrs. Denbrough know you're answering the phone like that?"

"Let's just say Mrs. D and me, we're on a need to know basis right now." Stan could hear the rowdy commotion of the others in the background. "Still on lockdown?"

Stan answered excitedly, "Not anymore." He loosened his bowtie and threw it across the room.

"So does this mean you're a free man, Uris?"

He ruffled the his well-kempt hair, "As free as I'll ever be."

"Good thing too. We had a whole undercover sting planned, just to get you out of there." He paused as if contemplating something, "how do you think I'd look in a yarmulke?"

"Is that St-Stan?" Bill's muffled voice broke through the receiver. "Let me ta-talk to him."

Bev was singing in the background, "Tell him I miss him!"

"Stan!" he heard Ben shout aloud, "STAN THE MAN!"

"I'm surprised you guys are even still around," Stan said.

"We couldn't leave because Billium was on diaper duty—

"Heeeey!" Georgie whined, "I don't wear diapers!"

"His folks are back now though, so we're leaving in half a jiff. Think you

can sceedaddle your tochus over here?"

Stan thought about it. The plan had always been to meet at Bill's and head to Mike's together. Mike's granddad owned a large patch of farmland on the outskirts of Derry that wasn't regulated by the town's ordinance against fireworks. Since the old man was a sucker for all things bright and sparky, he'd gathered a haul of illegal explosives for the seven friends to shoot off on his property. The group had been looking forward to it all week. From what Stan could make out, they were all bustling to get there fast. Probably because they knew that their parents would murder them if they ever found out what the kids were up to. They had to leave before the adults started asking questions.

Problem was, it took thirty minutes to bike to Bill's, and would take another hour for them all to bike to Mike's. The night was already off to a late start as is, and Stan figured if he walked the short cut through the Barrens, he might arrive at the farm at the same time as the others. He explained this to Richie and after discussing with the Losers they all agreed on the new plan.

"Okay," Richie said, "I've stolen Eddie's stopwatch—"

"Richie, I'm serious my mom will kill me if you break that!"

"Relax Eds." His tone deepened into that of a surly Drill Sergeant. He set the timer and it beeped loudly. "Alright private, we'll see you at Mike's in 0-600 hours."

"That's 6:00am you idiot."

"REGARDLESS! I expect you to be there!"

"Fine, see you soon."

"Wait! I'm curious, how'd you manage to convince the Rabbi to let you ditch the jewbeque?"

Ignoring the derogation, Stan answered his question, "Thank my mom for that. I'll never underestimate her powers of persuasion again."

"Ah Mama Uris, is there anything she can't do? And I mean anything—"

Stan hung up.

...

Stan stepped carefully through the darkened forest, eyes wide to his surrounding as he made his way through the dense underbrush. He should have just stuck to the plan and he wondered why he had suddenly decided to go off rails. They always meet at Bills. It's been an ongoing tradition since they were kids. Yet, for some reason Stan felt the need to change things up today. It made no sense. Stan liked structure. He liked routine. So what made this situation any different?

Stan wonders now if it was fate, compelling him to walk the barrens that night and leading him toward a cruel life lesson that he wishes he had never learned.

He was highly debating turning around and backtracking through the woods, to walk through Main Street instead, when he heard the muffled sound of laughter ahead of him. When he squinted into the trees he could make out the faintest glow of yellow light between the branches. With curiosity Stan followed, hoping it might be someone camping, and maybe they could point him in the direction of the farm. On the other hand, it could also be an axe murder and in that case, Stan should really be running for his life in the opposite direction. Still, he felt the need to keep moving toward the light. He took careful steps; moving quietly closer and closer till the voices became more audible and two faces flickered in flames.

It was worse than an axe murderer. It was Henry Bowers and Patrick Hockstetter.

Quickly, Stan slipped behind a tree. Out of sight, he peaked carefully around the corner. The two boys were sitting lazily beside a fire and drinking beers. Henry wobbled to his feet, taking a clumsy swig from his bottle before whipping it into the fire with a shrewd laugh. The glass shattered and the flames erupted, before settling back into a calm crackle.

"Where the fuck is Vic and Belch?" He grumbled, "Idiots said they'd be back with more brews like an hour ago."

"Think they were snuffed by the cops?"

"If they were, they'd best keep my name out of it. I don't need that kind of flack from my old man."

Patrick scoffed, "I don't know why you put up with that shit."

A shamefaced expression befell Henry, "You don't know what you're talking about—"

"I know if my old man ever put his hands on me I'd..." He picked a shard of broken glass out of the dirt and stood. With a leer he took, slow, calculated steps toward Henry. Henry teetered as Patrick closed the distance between them. He looked unsure as Patrick harboured the shard, and inched it toward his neck.

"Patrick..."

Almost seductively, Patrick dragged the blade gently across Henry's throat. "It only takes a second. You can't imagine how much blood comes out." His fevered eyes blazed in the flames. "Like a fountain."

"You could do it?" Henry asked him. He swallowed against the blade. "Kill someone...not an squirrel or rabbit or some shit...but a person...like for real?"

Patrick's long lips were jeering, "Don't worry Henry," he stepped back, and Stanley could swear he saw Henry let out a breath of relief. "I won't hurt you." He smiled, dropping the shard to the ground. "I like you too much."

"Yeah sure," Henry rubbed his neck and let out a tense laugh, "I could take you."

Patrick stepped closer again, peering down at Henry. Henry looked up, and Stan could see, even from his hiding place, that Henry's eyes were undoubtedly nervous. "I could take you too...all of you, if you'd let me."

Patrick's slender fingers played at Henry's belt buckle. Henry grabbed his wrists. "Patrick don't—" His voice faltered, coming back quaky, "I-I'm not some kind of fag you know."

Patrick sneered, "You seemed to enjoy it last time." He pulled himself out of Henry's hold and unclasped his own belt.

"I didn't...I was..." He shook his head, "You made me."

"I helped you." He stepped up to Henry, and patted his cheek, "You came crawling to me remember? Daddy beat that pretty little face in, and I made you feel all better...didn't I?"

Henry stumbled back on drunken feet, losing his balance and toppling to the dirt. He peered up with red, puffy eyes, and shook his head, "It wasn't like that."

Stan couldn't believe what he was witnessing. Henry actually looked like the vulnerable one. He was a far cry from the boy who incited fear in him, day in and day out for as long as Stan could remember. All Stan could do was stand there, frozen in shock, seeing as Patrick loomed over Henry, and watching as the other boy's bravado came tumbling down.

"The others will be back—"

"No they won't. I made sure of it."

Henry's eyes widened, taking in this sudden bombshell of news, "You fucking planned this!"

"What can I say, I like when things go my way."

"Patrick, I'm not going to do it. Not again."

Stanley couldn't take this any longer; he had to get away. He didn't like Henry, heck he'd even go as far as saying he hated him. But Patrick Hockstetter was a whole other can of worms, and Stan wouldn't wish him on his worst enemy, or in this case, his worst bully. He didn't want to see this. He certainly didn't want to live with knowing that he stood there and watched it happen. He moved back, taking cautious, quiet steps and trying to exit himself with as much conspicuousness as he could.

SNAP

Stan's heart jumped as his foot clipped a branch. The noise was thunderous in the silence of the forest. Henry looked up, his gaze zoning past Patrick. His eyes found Stanley's, glowing blue in the darkness. Stan felt his soul twist inside him. Henry didn't look angry, or manic, or ready on the warpath...he looked scared. It was almost like he was relieved to

see Stan.

It was like he was asking Stanley to help him.

Patrick turned as well. He placed a hand above his eyes and peered into the trees. "That you Uris?" A wild laugh escaped him, "I didn't take you for the peeper type."

Stanley mouth went dry. He shuffled fearfully on his feet and shook his head, "I wasn't! I swear! I'm sorry—"

"Tell you what!" Patrick shouted to him, cutting between his rambles. "I'll pretend I didn't see you there," he pointed at Stanley, "If you pretend..." He walked beside Henry, and combed his fingers through Henry's hair. "You didn't see us here."

Henry shook his head at Stanley.

There were only two options for Stan to take, fight or flight. He knew Patrick would annihilate him if he even tried to intervene. And while his moral compass was strictly pointing in Henry's direction, every self-preservation instinct inside him was screaming to run the other way and fast.

So that's exactly what he did.

Stanley took off.

The leaves rustled at his feet and Patrick's receding laugh echoed in the woods. He left Henry behind, listened as his betrayed shout called after Stan, "fucking coward!" He fled as fast as he could, not caring what direction his feet were taking him. A screeching-whistle, zipped through the sky, and startled him. Stan turned to follow the sound. Another whistle rang out, followed by a pop...and than another...and another. Sparks flew into the sky, peaking above the trees and splitting into colourful fragments in the blackness.

Fireworks.

He raced toward them, pushing his lungs to the limit and feeling his heart thudding in his chest. He ran. He kept running. He noticed a break in the trees and pushed through. A grassy field flaunted before his eyes. He

gulped and gasped, legs quaking beneath him.

Laughter rang out, and Stan could see a group of shadowed figures jumping about in the distance. The Losers.

"Hey!"

Stan jumped, and turned toward the voice. Richie was smiling at him. He held a roman candle in one hand and a bottle rocket in the other. "Bout' time you showed up!"

Stan collapsed into Richie's arms, Henry's words having finally caught up to him. Coward. Coward. Coward. Richie dropped the fireworks and pulled Stan in. He rubbed Stan's back, and Stan allowed himself to cry in his friend's embrace.

Richie never asked Stan about what happened that night, and Stan was grateful to never have to explain.

...

Stanley thinks about Henry now, as he sits behind the others and senses their hope unravelling seam by seam. He understands what they're feeling, he feels it too—*shame*. They're wishing they could have done more to stop it. Stanley just wishes he had done anything at all. His friends risked everything for him. But somehow Eddie is the one who got caught in the line of fire, and Stanley stood by, allowing it all to happen. He wonders why he's programmed this way—why he's so incapable of putting anyone else before himself. He never wanted them to get hurt because of him, but when push came to shove, he froze...*again*. When it was Henry, Stan told himself there were less stakes. He wasn't about to put himself in harms way for someone who actively made his life hell.

It's not that he didn't feel guilty about that night, because he did. It ate at his conscience, every fucking day for months. He still remembers that first day back at school, catching Henry's gaze in the hallway, and those blue eyes that Stan remembers so well, looking glassy and forlorn. He ripped his attention away. *Coward*. He couldn't look at Henry Bowers the same way ever again. Stan had wronged him in an awful way, and he knows he deserved every bit of extra

abuse Henry thrust upon him that year. In a way, it made him feel better, to welcome the punishment and simply act like somehow that made it all better.

This is different though. This concerns the Losers. He can never make amends for having let them down. He's always considered their friendship to be a selfless one; he doesn't doubt any one of them would give their life for him if they had too. After tonight, he questions if he could ever do the same.

The worst part is, deep down he already knows the answer. He's not strong enough to make that kind of sacrifice. Not even for his friends.

At some point he had to close his eyes, it was just after the screams began. His hands were unbound and Stan covered his ears to try and block out the sound. He's only been afforded that right because of what he is—even in Robert's vision he's a coward, a boy too weak to warrant caution from their captor. Before his lids fell he remembers Richie and Bill found each other, their hands clasped together and held tight. In the wake of their defeat, they need the other more than ever. Stan needs them also. He needs Richie to hold him like he did that fateful Fourth of July so many nights ago. He needs Bill to be his protector, to shield him against all things big and bad. He needs Eddie to be a little light in the dark, a smile across the room, reassuring him that they'll be all right, in spite of everything.

But they can't be those things. Not anymore. He hasn't earned that of them. The friendship is broken now—like the fragility of a porcelain doll, one crack snakes its way through, till what's left, are the damaged and irreparable shards of something that was once perfect. Stan feels like he's played a big part in driving that shattering wedge between them.

For all they've done for him, he has nothing to offer in return, and that probably makes him the most useless person on the planet right now. All he can do is carry his blame and hoping he might alleviate some of their guilt as well.

Another scream rings out and Stan presses his palms to his ears even harder. He can't stand listening to Eddie's pain, but it's Robert also, who makes Stan wish he were deaf. He hurts their friend, letting out

mangled grunts, and pants that have him sounding like a rabid animal.

Stan tries humming and rocking in place, hoping to drown it out but that doesn't work. Timorous and trembling where he sits, he can only pray it ends quickly.

Except that's not how Robert does things.

Everything he takes from Eddie, he does so with unforgiving viciousness. He draws the whole ordeal out, indulging in it. Forcing every brutal plea he can from Eddie's waning lungs till all that's left in him is a cacophony of breathy, pitiful sobs.

"He can't breath!" Richie shouts, and he's never sounded so completely beside himself with panic. "Listen to him! He can't fucking breath!"

It feels like an eternity of cruelty before the noises become more frantic and unhinged. Eventually, Robert lets out a low, repulsive groan of pure exultation and it's finally over. The room goes silent, save for a whimpering Eddie, and the laboured breaths of his abuser.

"God damn," he breathes long and satisfied. Robert peels himself free of their friend and chuckles arrogantly to himself, basking in his handy work. "That was...marvellous!"

His lack of remorse is stomach turning. He collects his discarded clothing and Stanley can hear the shuffle of fabric and the clink of a belt buckle as he redresses. It's sorrowful realization, knowing that Eddie won't be afforded the same comfort. When he opens his eyes—because he can't bring himself to do that yet—he'll find his friend, with the clothing torn from his body and strewn in pieces on the floor.

He'll find Eddie, broken beyond repair.

Heavy footfalls slap across the floor in their direction, coming to halt just steps from where they've been left, the unwilling participants in Robert's sick little game. Stan hears the uptick of his heart as the man lowers to their level. A puff of Robert's hot breath finds his skin.

"Open your eyes," Robert orders them, in a tone that is unnervingly complaisant for a man whose just committed the unthinkable. A moment passes for them to respond. Stan keeps his lids shut tight. He can only assume the others have done the same because he hears Robert sigh in displeasure. The man shuffles to his feet, and his footsteps retreat. Stan wonders if he's actually left, but another of Eddie's bloodcurdling screams' quickly answers his thoughts.

"STOP!" Bill shouts at the same time Richie shouts "EDDIE!"

Stan's eyes spring open and he can't believe what he's seeing. He stammers, "Oh—my—god..." and then the horrific moment hits him all at once and a traumatized, jarring shriek escapes him, "LOOK AT HIS ARM!"

Robert stands above Eddie's, twisting his arm into an unnatural position. Eddie's shoulder is displaced, the bone, contorted and poking against his skin. He starts to vomit, no doubt from the pain. Mucus hangs from his lips, sticky clear bile, as he dry heaves over and over, till what's left in his stomach is spewed all over the cement floor.

"Boys, I thought you've learned your lesson."

"We have!" Richie entreats, "Honest, we have!"

"When I ask you to do something..." Robert's is crazed, pulling Eddie's arm further out of place, "I EXPECT YOU TO DO IT!"

Bill clamours in desperation, "We got it!" Robert turns on him and he immediately eases his tone, trying not to incite the man further. "Listen, we're sss-sorry okay? Please. He-he's had enough Mr. Gray... it's over...enough."

Robert releases Eddie, and he drops to the floor, instantly curling into himself. His naked body trembles where he lays. It's a grim sight for them to bare witness and Stanley can't bring himself to keep watching. He looks to the others, but finds no comfort.

Robert steps over Eddie and strides toward them. The boys look up as he towers over them dauntingly. "He was good..." Robert says

gleefully, "in case anyone was wondering."

Bill's shakes his head. In a low, barely composed voice he mutters, "please don't—

Ignoring Bill, Robert's attention slithers to Richie, "How bout' you Richie? Oh yes! I bet you're real curious."

This isn't good. Stanley knows Richie is barely keeping it together as is, and he doesn't think Richie can withstand another second of Robert's provocation. He hopes Robert will just leave them alone, but his eyes are unscrupulous and scheming; Stanley knows right away that he's nowhere near finished. With ridicule, Robert says, "You're just a little pervert, aren't you Richard?"

From where he sits, Stan can see Richie's flushed cheeks. He blinks through angry tears and glares back at the man. He looks like he wants to say something. But he's clearly too afraid to speak, or doing anything that might set Robert off again.

The man crouches and with a contented breath, he moves so that he's close to Richie's face. Riche angles back, gulping as he leans in. Robert purrs at him, "He was deliciously tight." Richie's expression twists with pain. "Squealed real loud for me—didn't he? Like a scared little mouse." Richie chokes out a pathetic and ruined sound, turning to pieces in the wake of Robert's words.

Robert carries on, "speechless Trashmouth?" He let's out a goading laugh, "Well ain't that a first." His ego is mounting, thinking he's won.

"Leave him alone."

Stan turns to Bill at the same time Robert does. Even with his bruised face, Stan can see Bill's rancour expression. His tone is chillingly sharp as he repeats himself. "I said leave him alone...Robert."

Stan is stunned, unable to comprehend what Bill is thinking. This is the only time any one of them have used Roberts first name. Since the first night in the cellar, he's made it very clear how they must refer to him. Robert revels in the authority of hearing them call him Mr. Gray, and no one has dared to try and speak against him, until

now.

Stanley isn't sure how Robert will react to Bill's affront, but he knows the impudence isn't lost on the man. His smile drops instantly, and he rubs his chin tensely. A small, disbelieving snort leaves his lips and he abandons Richie where he sits. Bill looks relieved, even as Robert comes to crouch before him instead. It's almost like he knows Robert can't help himself as far as Bill is concerned. Stan thinks Bill is the only one who can incite this kind of reaction from the man, and his friend knows it.

Bill straightens, puffing his chest out to meet Robert with as much gull as he can muster. Stan envies his grit.

Robert tilts his head to meet Bill's gaze, "You think you can disrespect me Billy?" His tone is bone-chillingly lurid.

"You're a mu-monster," Bill spits back at him. "Yu-you don't deserve respect."

In a quick move, that makes Stan jump, Robert clutches Bill by the back of his neck. He squeezes his grip, "I don't know why you insist on provoking me silly boy." He yanks Bill roughly forward, and elicits a small, painful sound from him. "You know exactly how this'll end."

Bill's breath is heady and heavy with hatred, "Shh-sure I know..." He groans as Robert dig his nails in, "But you have nu-no clue."

Robert furrows his brows, and his expression shifts with puzzlement. He snags Bill by the hair and pulls his head back, "Oh is that right?"

"Yu-yeah...because...when th-this is all over..." he stares Robert in the eyes and doesn't stutter this time, "I'm going to kill you."

A vein on Robert's forehead twitches. He looks troubled and Stanley swears he catches a tinge of something resembling real worry in his eyes. He thinks this is the first time anyone, has ever challenged the man, let alone promised death. Though it only lasts a moment, Stan is certain Bill has struck a delicate nerve. Robert's nose turns up with annoyance, and he glares down at the kid in his clutches, "And what makes you so sure about that?"

"I rrr-read a lot of comics...th-the good guys always win...sorry."

His answer is flippant and ballsy, and it sends Robert into frenzy. He's livid. He storms to his feet, and drags Bill across the floor by his hair. Stan and Richie must watch as Bill struggles for freedom. Robert brings him closer and closer, until they are inches from where Eddie lays. He gives Bill a shake and forces him to look right at Eddie. "See that!" Robert yells, "I make the rules around here you little bitch!" He shakes Bill again, and yanks him to his feet, "I do what I want with you!" He pulls Bill in so that their chests are pressed together and their faces are inches apart. "I'M YOUR FUCKING GOD!"

The man pants in a wild way as he reaches behind to retrieve something from his pocket. Stan's heart stops. Robert pulls out a knife.

"NO!" Richie begs. "PLEASE! PLEASE! NO!"

"He didn't mean it!" Stan tries, he's crying as well, drivelling, swollen sobs that he can't control.

They can't do this without Bill. They just can't!

Silent tears fall from Bill's eyes and he sucks in a breath as Robert leans in. "And you belong to me," he says, poking the knife into Bill's side and, twisting it into his stomach, just enough to make him hiss. "All of you...understand me?"

With one hand still gripping Bill's hair, Robert forcibly nods Bill's head for him. He impersonates Bill with a fake boyish intonation, "Yes Mr. Gray, I understand!" He leans back to look Bill in the eyes and he smiles, "Of course you do."

Something unexpected happens next.

Bill gasps as Robert pulls the knife away. He's shocked when the man brings the blade around, to snap open the tie around his wrists. His hands fall loose, and he's suspicious, but there's barely time to react, because Robert pushes him to the ground. Bill catches himself and he lands beside Eddie. Robert is suddenly moving to where Stan and Richie are. Stan watches as Robert comes to them. An anxious feeling

of dread gathers inside Stanley, as he wonders what the man has planned for them. He crouches to Richie's level again, "That was exciting, wasn't it?" He reaches around Richie, and surprisingly opens his zip tie as well. Richie brings his hands to his front, and rubs his wrists in confusion.

"Unfortunately, that's all the fun I have planned for tonight."

Robert stands, and they all watch him carefully, uncertain of what his next move is.

He nods in Eddie's direction, "Clean him up." He then looks between them, his eyes individually meeting each boy, promising that they'll play again real soon. He finds Bill, and his attention lingers. His lips are wet, and he clenches his fists, as if trying to compose himself. He brings the knife back up and points it at him, "Don't think we're done yet Billy boy." With a matter-of-fact grin, he says, "I've got big plans for you. BIG! BIG! PLANS! Oh, but you just have to wait and see about that."

Then he turns and climbs up the steps; leaving the boys alone, to wallow in the terrible mess he's left behind.

A/N: Thanks for reading guys! The plot only thickens from here so stay tuned for more updates. Oh, and please leave me a comment! They are much appreciated and keep me motivated. xoxo

4. Chapter 4

A/N: Well this is my earliest update yet! Did someone order angsty Reddie? Because that is what you're getting! Thanks for the support thus far guys and please leave a review. I feed off the feedback!

His instinct is to race across the room right to Eddie, the moment the door shuts behind Robert. But he fights against the unbearable, longing wait of it all; because for now he has to stay put, listening vigilantly. He won't move a muscle, not before he's positive the coast is clear. He needs to hear the dead bolts first, the familiar rattle and scrape of the metallic latches fixing back together and secluding them from the world yet again.

He can't risk playing into another one of Robert's tricks.

He suspects this is exactly what the man wants, to fill Richie with false hopes that he's gone, and right before he can make it to Eddie he'll return. *"You didn't think I was done with him, did you?"* Richie can hear Robert's words like he's already there, forcing Eddie up the steps, ripping him away for good.

A horrific image plagues his mind now, one of a lifeless Eddie laying in the soil of some secluded forest beyond the cellar walls. Maggots and flies fill his bloated corpse. He's been disposed of, like a used up toy that Robert has grown tired with.

Fear consumes him, and Richie's eyes shine with a sheath of fresh tears. Richie can't let his friends become just another face plastered onto the back of some milk carton.

"Did you hear?" Someone will ask, sipping their coffee at the breakfast table, *"They found the body of that Kaspbrak boy in the woods. What a shame."*

"NO!" He wants to scream. They don't belong in this place. This isn't supposed to be their story. They're meant to spend days shootn' the shit at the quarry—their nights under cover of fireflies and burning street lamps—roaring out laughter as they race their bikes infinitely

into the promise of a new day.

But in the cellar he knows, they aren't guaranteed anything, except for the promise of Robert's eventual return. When? He has no clue, and that's what's torturing him the most. Like the hodgepodge of laces on his sneakers, Richie is in knots—a shambled mess that might come undone any moment. He just needs to pray to whatever God or superhero (because for real, what God let's this kind of shit happen to kids?) that Robert really has abandoned them for tonight.

When he looks across the room, he sees Eddie curled up on the floor, with Bill knelt at his side. His head is rested in Bill's lap and Bill is stroking his hair.

Thank fuck, for Bill fucking Denbrough.

The love he feels for Bill in that moment is ineffable. Richie doesn't know how he can manage to comfort someone else, considering his own heart-rending state. But Bill does it time and again. He's the only strength they need in this horrific situation, and he doesn't think any of them would have survived this long without him. He still remembers fumbling down the steps beside Robert after his first time. He was a mess, eyes puffy and red with tears, his lip busted and bleeding. He'd been mouthing off the entire way to Robert's bedroom, and had earned himself a hell of a right hook to the face the night before.

That hadn't stopped him though, and he had every intention of defying the man till the bitter end—but in the instance when Robert thrust into him, he shut right up. He could only beg for it to stop. It hurt so goddamn much, to the point that Richie wondered if Robert was actually trying to fuck him to death. He wouldn't put it past the man. All night—*all fucking night*, Robert forced himself onto Richie, over and over again. By the end, he had Richie on his knees sucking him off. He was gagging so much; he thought he was going to vomit. Now he wished he had, fuck wouldn't that have been a great way to piss the bastard off?

But he's ashamed to admit that he swallowed, every bit of it.

"See," Robert said to him, saccharine sweet. He pulled Richie's bottom

lip back with his thumb, *"I just knew that mouth was good for something else."*

Richie shakes his head. He can't think of that right now. He focuses on Bill instead.

Bill his friend—who caught Richie in his arms after Robert had shoved him off that final step like he was worthless. His legs shook, his thighs were throbbing and his body was weak. He couldn't even stand straight. He leaned on Bill with his entire weight. He still hangs onto the words that Bill whispered in his ear that morning, *"I've got you."* Gratitude aches in his heart as he remembers, *"I've got you Richie. I won't let go."*

He wonders now if Bill will ever let himself be rescued. He doubts it. He knows Bill will always place his friends on a higher tier, far above himself. In a strange way he's like their guardian angel, and Richie fears it's his willingness to be so self-sacrificing that will get Bill hurt even worse.

When he remembers back to minutes ago, he's still shook by Robert's departing words, *"big plans for you..."*

Big Plans? Big Plans? Big Plans?

He doesn't want to imagine what that could mean for Bill, and he can only hope that Robert was just talking out of his ass.

Because Bill is good, and Robert will find anything he can—do anything he can—to trounce on that goodness and stomp on it till there's nothing left. Richie thinks even Bill, lion-hearted as he may be, can only take so much before he loses it completely.

...

There's a brassy screech from above as Robert toys with the plated locks. The sound knocks Richie back to the present.

"He's coming back," Richie worries, but then he hears one of the bolts being secured. *Click one.*

A set of keys jangles from behind the door. *Click two.*

Please be true.

Click three. That's it then. It's over, or at least for tonight. With the final bolt locked in place, Richie is instantly on the move; tripping over his own feet in a full-fledged hurtle across the floor.

"Eddie!" he calls out to him, "Eddie! Oh no! No! Eddie!" He's babbling. He knows he needs to be strong, but as he slides to Eddie's side, he has no idea how. The smell of sex surrounds Eddie's broken body. Hand-shaped bruises mar his hips, red scratches split into his delicate skin, his arm is mangled, and oh God, why is there so much—

"Blood!" Stanley gasps. Richie hadn't noticed him until now. He hovers on his feet, staring down at them crying, "his...his thighs. Guys he's bleeding a lot!" Richie can't help but feel a building resentment with every tear that slips down Stanley's face. He narrows his eyes at his friend. Friend? How can he be, when he's just standing there watching them, just like before?

He just fucking stood there!

And Richie wants to shout at him, *"You could have done something!"* Which he almost does, but he feels a soft hand cup his wrist and when he looks, Bill is watching like he knows what Richie is thinking.

His eyes say it all, *"not now, he needs you."*

Richie sucks in his pride and forgets for the moment about being angry. He bites his tongue and looks down at Eddie. His heart aches so much. Eddie whinges as he hugs his arm and buries his face into Bill's knee. "It hurts," he says, eyes scrunched tight in anguish, "it hurts so bad!"

Richie's hands tremble, ghosting above Eddie's body like he's afraid to touch him. "I'm sorry..." he's says, barely keeping it together. "But Eddie, we're here with you now. You're going to be all right."

He knows Eddie is far from all right—in fact, he doesn't think Eddie will ever be all right again. But he needs to say something to calm him down, and let him know that he's not alone.

Eddie shuffles barely a fraction, and a sharp, painful wail leaves his

lips.

"Oh God!" Richie eyes widen. He's in full-blown panic mode, and his eyes dart to Bill for answers, "What do we do?"

Bill swallows nervously, and he thinks. An epiphany flashes in his eyes. Though clearly uncertain, he draws his fingers through Eddie's hair and leans down, shushing him gently, "I know it's rrr-real bad rrr-right now. But we're going to help you Eddie. I sss-swear."

Eddie nods, gasping through every harsh tremor befitting his small body.

Bill looks up. "Rich," his voice is thick with authority and Richie's worried eyes lock on him. Clearly, Bill is hesitant to say whatever it is he's about to say, but ultimately he comes to a resolution. Taking a breath, he tells Richie, "You nu-need to reset his arm."

The words hit him like a freight train and he thinks, this is it—this is the moment where Bill Denbrough finally loses his mind. He shakes his head in a dizzying panic, "I don't know...I...how am I...nu-no!"

"Richie!" Bill's voice cuts between his rambles. He isn't having it. "You have to do th-this."

"Bill I can't!"

"Yes you can!" Bill's eyes are earnest and dripping wet with purposeful tears. "We all know you don't just sss-spend hours at the library with Ben just to keep him company. You're there because yu-you like to be there. Listen, for as long as I've known you, you've always been the sss-smartest kid Rich, the mu-most curious. You read all those mu-medical books, and watch all that gross surgery shh-shh-shit on TV because it interests you, nu-not because it's an easy way to make a pu-punch line to a gory joke. I know you've studied this sst-stuff before."

Still holding his wrist, Bill lifts up Richie's trembling hand to rest it on Eddie's arm. Bill nods at him, "You're the only one who ca-can do this."

Richie looks again, to see Eddie laying in desperation. He scared

shitless—he's only ever seen this kind of stuff on television. Thankfully, he's never had to put any of what he's learned into practice; well until now. He worried he's going to botch the whole damn thing and Eddie's going to turn out far worse than he already is. Not to mention the physical toll it will take. He's going to have to hurt Eddie excruciatingly, before he can make him better. The thought of causing Eddie any kind of pain makes Richie sick to his stomach.

But then Eddie whimpers, writhing on the floor and Richie knows, he can't just leave him like this. Bill is right. Reservations aside, he needs to step up. He needs to help his friend.

He shoots Bill a weary glance but Bill's eyes glint with encouragement, "It's up to you Trashmouth."

No pressure.

He turns back to Eddie.

Eddie. Eddie. Eddie.

He needs to help Eddie.

"Eds," he says softly, and Eddie musters a groan in response. He's got his head still buried in Bill's lap. "Eds, I need you to look at me."

Richie places his palm on Eddie's cheek. He strokes the soft skin against his thumb. Eddie blinks a few times, opening his eyes. They are red and raw, looking so completely lost. Richie bites the inside of his bottom lip to keep it from quivering worse, "there you are."

"Richie," Eddie mews, "I tried...bu-but I couldn't stop him...I'm weak."

"No," Richie asserts, "No. Eds you aren't weak. You're the bravest kid I know."

"Yu-you got me mu-mistaken for Bill."

Richie is flabbergasted. How Eddie can muster the courage to have any sense of humour despite his nightmarish ordeal, is beyond even Richie's comprehension. It just goes to show just how plucky Eddie

really is.

"Yeah right," Richie answers, "Big Bill's got nothing on you Spaghetti Man." He looks at Bill, and Bill's lips drag up into something resembling a smile, though it's far too sad to be considered one.

Before he can respond, another painful tremor ripples through Eddie and he pierces his lips to fight against the sharp cry. He breathes through it, "It won't stop..."

Richie falls into action, "Listen, I'm going to try something. It'll hopefully make things a little better." He cradles Eddie's face with protective reassurance, "But you're gonna' have to trust me, alright?"

Eddie's eyes widen in trepidation. "Will it hurt?"

He has this look about him, like he doesn't actually want to know the truth. But Richie won't lie to him. He thinks Eddie can't handle another terrible surprise tonight.

Richie nods. "Like a bitch," he answers honestly. Eddie groans and scrunches his eyes shut again. "But hey!" Richie declares, "I'm going to be right here with you. And so are Bill and Stan..."

He trails off, turning to look at Stanley who's still hovering formidably at a distance. He clenches his jaw, his eyes are serious and he calls out to him harshly, "Stanley!"

Stan jumps at sharpness in his tone. He's fiddling his fingertips nervously. He stares back at Richie with a chagrined sort of expression. Richie tries to compose himself, as he stares him down. "We need you," he says in a familiar callback to his plea just hours before. Guilt etches all over Stan's face and he gives a numb nod. Hesitantly, he collapses to his knees between Bill and Richie, so that Eddie's friends are all surrounding him. Using his eyes, Riche gestures to Eddie hand and Stan reaches out, taking it between his two palms.

"I'm sorry." Stanley snivels, "I'm su-sorry Eddie...bu-but I'm here too."

...

To begin, Richie positions his hands where they need to be on Eddie's

shoulder. He psyches himself up, rolling through a collection of mental textbooks, and remembering the steps to relocating the bone.

He thinks he's ready to do this. But he's so nervous looking at Eddie. Before he can think better of it, he's already blurting out something stupid, "I'm guessing if I fuck this up, you're going to clobber my ass with whatever bionic arm you get to replace this one, huh?"

Eddie looks exhausted, but a brittle smirk plays on his lips, "Yu-you better fucking count on it."

They all chuckle collectively—miserably—unhinged chuckles that feel forced and falter in a moments notice. Then it's back to the cruel reality of the situation. Richie nods and Eddie nods back, "I trust you," he whispers.

Richie tells him he's going to count down. He waits till Eddie hides his face back in Bill's lap. Bill hugs his head, cooing encouragements, "It'll be over soon."

Stan squeezes Eddie's hand, and Eddie squeezes back. His knuckles are white with anticipation.

"One..." Richie starts; his fingertips tap over Eddie's skin.

"Two..." He feels his hands shaking, and he wills them to stop.

"THREE!" He sucks in a deep breath, trying to vacuum all the courage he can, preparing himself for what he's about to do and—

SNAP!

...

The worst is over and they're just sitting in stunned silence, amazed that Richie actually managed to pull it off. Richie can notice the deep bruises, now starting to form on Eddie's arm—ugly blotches of green, purple and blue that aren't supposed to be there. They're growing larger with every passing minute, festering. But at least Eddie can move his arm without the displaced agony. Eddie is panting, he's spent, and strands of hair stick to his face, heavy with sweat. Richie takes Eddie's face between his palms and presses his forehead against

his.

"You did it," he says to him, "I'm so fucking proud of you."

Rested against him, Eddie just nods and cries. Richie's holds Eddie there for a few moments, hating that he can take all the pain away, because Eddie is hurting all over—inside and out. He eventually pulls back, and looks at the others. They have the same conscious expressions on their faces. Eddie can't lay in this mess any longer.

Richie looks around for anything to cover Eddie up. The others do the same. In a corner of the room is an old, rusted-up meat freezer, with a dusted over white sheet cover. Richie nods towards it, and Stan runs to retrieve it. He rips the sheet off of the freezer and shuffles it out. A heavy spattering of dust catches the air, clouding around them. Stan burst through the mess, hightailing it back to them. He hands the sheet to Richie. It's filthy, with grimy stains all over, but it's all they have to work with for the moment. He just hopes Eddie won't take notice.

He drapes the sheet over Eddie and Bill helps him sit up, so they can fully wrap it around him.

"Can you stand?" Richie asks him, and Eddie looks uncertain but he nods, informing them that he's willing to try. Richie secures his arms around Eddie's waist. He gets up with careful movements, trying to hoist Eddie up with him. Eddie groans and stumbles and Bill jumps forth to catch him on the opposite side.

Eddie's legs are like jello, quaking with each step. He hisses in pain as they walk him toward the bathroom—if you can call it that. It's more like windowless and shoddy concrete attachment to the cellar, with a toilet and tub and nothing else.

"You're almost there," Bill tells him, and Richie wonders if he can also feel Eddie body getting heavier as they move along, like he's losing strength with each passing step. Stan runs ahead of them. He enters the bathroom and switches the light on. The florescent bulb hanging by a string on the ceiling, chirps and buzzes to life, flickering a few times before finally settling.

When they walk into the room, there's little space for the boys to linger. They need to give Eddie his privacy to clean up, but Richie's afraid of leaving him alone. Eddie's staring fixedly at the wall, eyes vacant, swaying on his feet and Richie's not sure he can do this himself.

Richie makes a decision, hugging Eddie tighter against him. "Someone should stay here," he suggests to Bill, and there's no arguing who that someone is.

Bill understands, he carefully disentangles himself from Eddie and to Richie he says, "We'll clean up outside." He's glad Bill is thinking the same thing. They can't let Eddie take another step back into that cellar until the remnants of what's been done to him are cleared—every trace of semen, blood and vomit. The memories of his assault will always be a part of Eddie, but they can at least try to limit the reminders.

"Good," Richie says, "and his clothes..." He trails off, wondering if they'll find anything usable. He can still hear the violent tear of fabric, so clear in his ears as Robert stripped Eddie naked.

"We'll see wha-what we can salvage."

Richie squeezes Bill's arm in silent thanks, and Bill places his hand over Richie's, "we're rrr-right outside the door if you need us," he promises.

He walks out the room, but Stan hesitates. He catches Richie's eyes. The burning anger still throbs in his heart and Richie just shakes his head at him. He's not ready yet. He breaks their gaze with a miff. From a sideways glance, he can see Stan—head hung low as he pulls the door shut behind him.

...

They're alone now. Completely.

Richie rubs Eddie's arms, telling him he's going to run a bath. Eddie says nothing. He's got the blanket pinched between his fingers, and curled up against his chin like he does when they're watching a scary

movie. Richie thinks it easier for him to hide that way—like when a monster would show up on screen and Eddie would cover his whole head with the blanket, waiting for the scary parts to end.

With reluctance, he leaves Eddie standing where he is so he can get the water going. He doesn't realize how badly he's shaking, not until he's kneeling before the tub, hands trembling as he turns the handles to the faucet. The water is hot—then cold—and too hot again. He needs to get a hold of himself. He pauses, takes a breath and jostles the handles a little slower this time. He finally adjusts it to an adequate temperature. He grabs the stopper laying in the middle of the tub and plugs the drain.

The tub fills up quickly, and Richie shuts off the tap. He turns around to find Eddie exactly where he left him. It's unnerving, because he looks like he hasn't moved a muscle. Richie leans on the edge of the tub, and pushes himself to his feet. He walks over to Eddie. Richie brings his fingertips up, touching the blanket. "I know you probably don't want to, bu-but you need to take this off Eds...to umm...get in the tub."

Eddie breaks free of his trance, and lifts his gaze slowly to look at Richie. He looks so scared and Richie responds by taking hold of the sheet, and carefully pulling it free from Eddie's stiff grip.

"We're going to do this together," he assures him.

Eddie's tears are warm, falling from his chin, onto Richie's knuckles. He swallows against a sob, and nods.

Unwavering, Richie keeps his gaze held with Eddie's. He won't allow himself to wander and break their trust. He opens the sheet, and lets it crumple to the floor with a whish. Eddie instantly crosses his arm and covers up, looking ashamed. Richie places his arm securely around Eddie's shoulders.

"Hey..." he whispers, using the same gentle words Bill once spoke to him, "I've got you."

Eddie allows Richie to guide him to the water. He steps in with one foot and then the next. As he lowers himself in, quiet sounds of

aching discomfort escape him. Richie tries to ignore them, focusing only on helping Eddie sit down. When he's submerged, Eddie pulls his knees up against his chest. The water burbles around him. "Thank you," he rasps.

Richie smiles sadly. He sits on the floor beside the tub, and rests his elbow on the porcelain edge. Eddie get's lost again—his thoughts swirling as he stares ahead, unspeaking.

Richie hates to see him like this. It was such a challenge for Eddie to break free of his encumbering fears. Sure, he's always been a little scared of the world—and now it seems he had good reason to be. But Richie always knew he would find a way to overcome that. When Eddie threw away his inhaler and stood against his mother, he had such thrill in his eyes, exhilarated by the idea of finally being able to control his own life.

That day was meant to be the start of something good—the turn of a new leaf.

Who would have ever guessed it would turn out to be the worst day of their lives. Well, up until now. This, Richie thinks, this is now the worst day.

Eddie's life has been altered in this horrible, unimaginable way and he senses Eddie may be affected even worse than him and Bill.

Because Richie sees Eddie in such an honest way, and he knows Robert has stolen any ounce of self-assurance Eddie once had. He's unable to miss the abrading look of anxiety on Eddie's face. He knows what Eddie must be thinking—unclean—tainted—disgusting things that he'll never stop feeling.

"It's not true," Richie tells him.

Eddie just frowns with a twisted, self-deprecating expression. Richie tries again, needing him to hear this. "Eddie," his voice is firm, urging Eddie to look at him. "All that shit going on in your head right now, whatever your punishing yourself for, none of it's true."

"You don't understand—"

When he turns to finally face Richie, Eddie looks devastated, "he made me...he...he..." He starts to weep, sounding ragged and lamenting. His body quavers with the weight of his grief.

Richie knows exactly what Eddie is speaking of. It happens to him also, when Robert touches him all over, making Richie respond in ways he's still ashamed to admit to. He knows it's not his fault. It's not Eddie's either; it's just Robert's filthy way of making them feel powerless in their own skin.

Richie reaches over to gently brush the damp strands away from Eddie's face. Eddie leans into his touch. "Don't you understand Eds, it happened to you—against your will. However way your body responded, whatever you may believe, it was biology that took over. You can't blame yourself for that." Richie brings his hand down to squeeze Eddie's shoulder, "You never wanted it. None of us did. So please, don't let Robert do this to you. Not when he's already taken so much."

"I can still feel him..." Eddie chokes out, "Like he's still inside me." He stares at Richie with a hollow sort of sadness, seeming empty—like a shell of the boy he once was. "Will it get easier?"

Richie won't lie to Eddie, so he says nothing at all.

Eddie takes the silence as his answer. Another round tear brims in the corner of his eye and he blinks, letting it fall. "I want to go home."

"We'll get you there Eds, I promise."

"Beep Beep," he tells Richie, "don't make promises you can't keep. We're going to die here Richie. We're going to die, and the last thing I said to my mom was 'I hate you.' I...I just left her there Rich, and now I'm never gonna' see her again. No one knows where we are. We don't even know where we are!" He shakes his head bitterly, "Sherriff Bowers' won't do shit—he's probably already forgotten us by now."

"Probably," Richie doesn't argue, "But you have to believe the others are still searching. Haystack, Mike, Beverly—they won't give up on us Eds, I know they won't. So we can't give up either."

Eddie looks unconvinced, closing his eyes and resting a cheek against his knees, "Did we do something wrong?" When Eddie opens his eyes they are bleak—almost black, capturing all the darkness he's ever witnessed. "Why else would this be happening Richie?

Richie has already asked himself this question so many times before, and every time he has to come back to the same, haunting and unfair truth, "because he chose us."

5. Chapter 5

A/N: So yeah guys...I really don't know where this chapter even came from. It was not what I intended to write for Chapter 5, but I was experience some writers block and so I decided to add in this little leeway to tide you all over, before we start getting into the good stuff. I'm not quite sure how I feel about this update honestly, but I hope you enjoy. Warnings for rape/sexual abuse. Please let me know what you think. I had a tough time writing this one, so feedback would be amazing and helps me improve every chapter!

He offered Bill Denbrough an ultimatum—to come willingly, or Robert would choose one of the others in his stead. Robert had expected a moments contemplation at least, for Bill to weigh the value of his own life against the rest. But the answer had come, forthwith and without a second thought. Bill stared into Robert's bulging, charged eyes, deeming himself as the only defence between his friends and the berserk man before him, and he agreed.

The Losers dove on him, clutched onto their friend, begged him not to go and Bill had turned and promised them, so convincingly, that he'd be alright. He knew better of course. He'd seen the look in Robert's eyes, a lusting carnality fastened only on him. But they'd wanted nothing more than to trust him, to hope that Bill really was as invincible as they'd believed him to be. So they let Bill go, watched with watery eyes as Robert led him away.

"Hang tough Big Bill," Richie's shaken voice had called, and he clutched his hand to his heart, a tribute to his soon to be fallen friend.

It was clear these boys held Bill Denbrough to a high esteem. They admired him, the nickname proved that much. The annoyance pestered and whittled his bones, sent blood boiling to his brain. So Robert Gray made it his prerogative to ensure Bill understood his place. In a bed, beneath Robert, or on his knees before him—either way, he was at the man's utter will.

On his first night he led Bill into a decrepit looking bedroom, dappled with mould and cobwebs. Paisley wallpaper peeled from corners. The curtains

were thin, like the wing of a bat; not that it mattered, the windows were boarded up anyways. Ovoid caricatures of grinning clowns hung on the walls. But they weren't alone. Impending life size figures of clowns stood all around the room, their lolling smiles and cross-eyed gazes observed the pair with mirth.

"My friends," Robert explained, squeezing Bills shoulder. The boy stiffened, and Robert walked him down a carpeted path that led right to the bed. It was large, the frame built sturdy, soldered to the wall with black iron rods. A mattress draped with dirty yellow sheets was rested in the center. He remembered the dolorous look on the boy's face as he took it all in, his atoms apple bobbed in nervous foresight.

Robert stepped up behind him, Bill sucked in a shallow breath. His chest pressed against the boy's back. Robert coiled an arm around him. He squeezed Bill's face between his fingers and leaned down, nuzzling his nose into the back of Bill's head, scenting his hair. His fingertips gambolled down Bill's neck, beneath soft fabric, playing at his collarbone, and he unfastened the top button of Bill's shirt.

The tears fell freely once Robert began to undress him. The man unclasped a second button. Bill bit his bottom lip, trying hard stop himself from crying aloud. Despite his attempts, Robert could still hear the quiet pules managing to sneak passed his lips. The bravado he'd put on for his friends was crumbling. Robert finished with the last button, drawing his palm over Bills stomach and stroking his smooth, untouched skin. A possessive feeling lapped through him. He swelled with pride; no one but Robert Gray would ever touch Bill Denbrough like this again. Robert would make sure of that.

Her reached to undo Bill's belt and a hand came forth to stop him. Bill held his wrist. The gesture had been sudden, perhaps even subconscious and unintended, but in a split-second, the circumstance had shifted. Bill had made clear he would not go down without a fight. Robert's lips turned up into a deranged smile. His dick twitched between his legs. Oh, how he loved the feisty ones. There was nothing more satisfying than the thrill of subduing an unwilling partner. He licked his lips and in a spectre of savage excitement, he turned Bill around and tackled him onto the bed.

"Naughty Billy." Robert bolstered, as he wrestled the boy down, dodging punches, and kicks and delivering his own violent blows. He pinned Bill's

wrists to the mattress with one hand. "I was going to be gentle..." Bill panted beneath him, nose bleeding, shirt torn, eyes wet with tears.

So, so pretty.

"But now, I don't think I will."

Bill heaved back, spitting a thick gob into Robert's face. "Fff-uck you!" He snapped back.

Robert let out a brainsick cackle. "You're going to be one of my favourites," he said, wiping his face clean. He rubbed the mess onto his pant leg and reached to unfasten Bill's belt for a second time. Bill squirmed in desperation as Robert tugged his jeans loose. "I can tell."

He brought an elbow down, ramming Bill in the stomach and knocked the wind out of him. Bill choked; keeling forward and Robert took the opportunity to turn him over. He pulled the boy's boxers down, and licked two fingers. A sound between a sob and a gasp filled the air when Robert jabbed them into Bill, opening him up, preparing him.

"You can still beg for me to stop," Robert teased him, though he had no intention of ever doing so. He was already so hard, and aching with anticipation. He unzipped and pulled out, ready to plunge into Bill with a savage and brutal thrust. "Come on Billy Boy, beg me!"

Bill curled his fist between the sheets, and pushed his face into the mattress, attempting to muffle his cries. Robert smirked, "Fine then," he gripped Bill's waste with both hands, and muttered arrogantly, "You will soon."

...

Collecting on his departing hairline is a bead of sweat. It hangs there for a moment, holding onto a red flyaway like a climber, clutching onto a peak for dear life. The van hobbles over a pothole, jolts him in his seat, and the bead is knocked loose. It meanders down his face, smearing a messy streak of chalky white paint with it. Robert Gray shakes his head; jester bells jangle on his suit as he does so. He's wound up. A hard bulge throbs between his legs, concealed only by the silk parachute pants he's wearing. He sucks in a shallow breath,

stifling the lechery purging through him by attempting to mask it with the rage he also feels.

He bristles in his seat as he speeds his van wildly down Jackson Street. His ivory-gloved hands wring stringently against the steering wheel and he imagines instead, his palms enclosed around Bill Denbrough's soft, pink throat. He can practically feel the boy's pulse thrumming against his grip, rising desperately in a futile skirmish for air. He contemplates squeezing the life out of him, finishing the job this time, and listening to his oesophagus collapse with a brash POP! His bones splintering like brittle autumn leaves beneath Robert's firm hands.

It'd be a beautiful sight, no doubt, but certainly not enough retribution to satisfy him.

He's always relished in the opportunity to reign in an obstreperous little brat and show him whose boss, but Bill Denbrough is a special brand to come by—audacious and insolent—rare to find in a boy his age. Robert was made to feel very undignified by his antics in the cellar, and he can't have that becoming a habit now, can he?

Oh no!

He narrows his eyes out the windshield, his teeth gnash and his lips curl up into a red-lipped scowl. Billy boy deserves far worse than the luxury of a swift death. He promised the boy something special and has every intention of making good on that promise. He'll deliver a punishment with a lasting impression.

You bet he will!

He carries the memory of their first time with him like a badge of honour, wanting nothing more than to relive the pure, unadulterated pleasure he'd felt when he came so close to breaking Bill that night.

So close.

Tonight he'll strike down a white-knight. Guilt is an inky blackness that will swallow Bill Denbrough whole. Devoid of hope, he imagines the boy collapsing to his knees, barely clinging to his sanity. Even the

Losers won't have the power to save him from a despair far worse than death. What Robert has planned, it will break Billy, once and for all.

...

He arrives and pulls the van to halt beside the curb. When he peers out the window a beautiful two-story home, with green paneling and white cornicing stands before him. A high-pillar porch, once an escape for a happy family to sit and enjoy each other's company, is now completely void. Robert smirks when he sees the curtains are drawn for all four windows. He keeps a close eye on all the families of his victims. He knows the Denbrough's are home, but their unperceivable, like shadows in the darkness. Sharon Denbrough is likely still in bed, sleeping her days away, pathetically dragging her feet to the kitchen only when she has to. Zack Denbrough is in his garage—escaping into his work, drawing up blue prints and making sense of puzzles, everywhere but where it matters.

The absence of their eldest son has weighed heavily on the family. They've separated themselves, not just from those in the neighborhood, but also from each other.

It makes what he's about to do that much easier.

A large oak tree with a rope swing is rooted in the front yard. The seat sways just barely, rocked slowly, back and forth by two small, sneaker-clad feet that graze gingerly over tall tufts of six-week-old, un-mowed grass. A small boy sits alone. Head hung low, and mouth turned down into a permanent mope. His fallen gaze is focused on something in his hands. He toys with it, gingerly turning it over in his small palms. It's his favourite thing in the whole wide world—a paper boat.

But he's never sailed it. Not once. They were supposed to do that together.

Robert Gray giggles wickedly to himself. *Such a lonely...lonely little boy.* "Don't pout Georgie Denbrough. Pennywise will keep you company."

6. Chapter 6

A spectre of dewy sunlight feathers the air around him softening his dream at the edges—but he can see passed the gauzy mist that dusts his tan skin to notice he's at the quarry with Ben. They sit on an outcrop. The stone is hot beneath his thighs. The water—it laps so garishly below them. Bill almost feels like this is real.

Ben has a book in his lap and flips briskly through the delicate pages. The cover is vinyl bound and embossed with gold numbers—what looks to be a date. The book is old and worn at the spine where the fabric is splintering. No good for Ben, who's allergic to the dust lurking between the folios of old books. It's a big hindrance for him seeing how he spends so much time at the public library.

On more than one occasion, Bill has had to circumnavigate his way through the labyrinth of books, hoping to drag Ben away for some fun and fresh air, because there's nothing a few scraped knees and bruised elbows wouldn't fix. Often, he'd find Ben sitting stoically between the stacks; his face buried in book, with his eyes swollen and teary stained beyond belief. Almost exactly as he looks now—completely transfixed.

"Sss-so..." Bill strikes up, daring to break his focus, "How's it going, then?"

Ben's gaze is still darting between the words on the pages. He doesn't look up, but says; "I know we're bound to find something soon." He sounds so obstinately sure of himself, "a matter of time, is all."

Bill watches him; troubled by the way Ben is gripping the book, so tightly the skin on his knuckles is turning white. He reaches over, drops his palm atop Ben's knee like he's pressing pause. "Why don't you give it a rrr-rest, for a while." Ben looks up and the tension passes between them, "Cu-come on Ben, you can't keep going la-like this."

"Don't stress over me," Ben refutes. He pushes Bill's hand away and goes on reading with those puffy eyes Bill knows so well.

"How ca-can I nu-not?"

Ben actually scoffs, seeming beyond irritated with him. "You're unbelievable," he tells Bill, "Always so stubborn, you know that Denbrough?" He looks at Bill and points, matter-of-factly, "You're worrying bout' me, meanwhile our friends are the ones who really need you. Keep them safe, that's your job. So please, let me do mine."

"I know th-that," Bill defends. "It's just you're my fff-frr-friend too..." he says, because he can't let this go, "And I'm ta-telling you it won't change anything if you take a bu-break."

"This isn't just another study project, you know. I'm over here, trying to solve a mystery...you're mystery actually. So please, just hush."

Bill sighs. He really doesn't understand this guilt he's feeling. Logically he aware, none of this is actually happening. He's not really here, spending the afternoon with his best friend at the quarry. And Ben isn't sitting beside him, torturously coaming through every cold case about missing children in the Derry public archives and desperately searching for any links to his missing friends.

But there's still this unbearable, sinking feeling in Bill's chest, like he senses deep down this is exactly what Ben is doing, because, he's known Ben practically his whole life. So he's experience first hand how stalwart and resourceful Ben can be when he puts his mind to something. He's got this innately investigative nature and paired with his unbending loyalty, there's not doubt Ben has saddled this case—determined to not fail the forgotten Losers like the police have.

So he can't help but worry, because Ben is likely running himself ragged seeking all these answers Bill fears, might be better off buried.

Bill needs a distraction; he thinks Ben could use one too. Swallowing the anxiousness inside him, he makes a request, "Can you tell mmm-me about th-them?"

Ben pauses mid-page-turn, and turns slowly to Bill with an uncertain sidelong glance. "Is that a good idea?" Ben asks, "It might upset you."

It's Bill's turn to be determined. He looks hard at Ben, unflinching and says "I can handle it." Though if he's being honest, the idea of discussing his family utterly terrifies him to know end. He doesn't want to picture

them grieving over him. He knows Ben's probably right, this will only serve to bring him more hurt, but he's willing to play recklessly with his emotions; desperate for any semblance of that bygone time before Robert totally debased his life.

"Please Ben," Bill crosses his legs, turning to face his friend with wide, beseeching eyes, "I really need this."

Ben bites his lips still looking doubtful, but nods. He closes his book—a small victory for Bill, and sets it aside. He leans back on his palms and purposefully asks, "Who first?"

"Okay, my parents."

Ben scratches the back of his neck, seeming a little nervous. "There's not a whole lot to tell. I mean, you're dad's working a lot. You're mom, she took some time off from the piano lessons...but their umm...doing okay, I guess."

Bill's not convinced. He tilts his head and raises a brow, "Don't bu-bullshit me Ben. Just be sss-straight."

"Fine." Ben answers meekly, "Sad. I'm talking all the time sad."

"Oh," Bill nods slowly, feeling a little sick now and regretting having pressed. "But are they like, completely fff-falling apart?"

Ben swallows, and nods sadly, "I don't think you can blame them."

Actually, yes he can, because his parents marriage had been wrought with issues even long before he went missing. They fought all the time behind closed doors after assuming their sons were asleep. And Bill had tried so hard to shield Georgie from the worst of it, because his little brother didn't deserve that kind of flack. He still remembers all those times Georgie climbed into his bed—trembling like a tiny leaf—and how Bill would hold him and wrap Georgie protectively in his arms, whispering stories in his ears until he was lulled to sleep.

Now Bill wishes, they'd somehow use his disappearance as an impetus for change—just come together and bury their shit long enough to remember they still have another son relying on them to step up. But he suspects it's only served to exacerbate the rift between them; and without him there, he

can't stand the idea of his little brother probably bearing the weight of their crumbling family all alone. That's too much burden for his little shoulders to bear.

Bill inhales a shaky breath. He fights against the upsurge of emotion and asks about Georgie next.

Ben is honest this time, "He's sad too. But, in different sort of way...more lost I guess. It's like he doesn't know how to be without you."

Bill's eyes are wet, threatening tears as he processes Ben's words and suddenly...

...

...he's gazing through a pellucid curtain, like staring into a memory within a dream. They lay on his bed together, Georgie with his head snuggled into the crook of Bill's elbow, and Bill with his arm wrapped safely around him. Pinched between his fingers is an issue of 'The Amazing Spider-Man' being shared between them.

Georgie always loved when Bill made the extra effort to act out the characters, so Bill made sure to plaster on his best, high-pitch Mysterio impression. "You'll never escape me Spider-Man!" For some reason when he read to Georgie, Bill never stuttered.

Georgie, rosy cheeked and giggling rolled around the mattress, holding his stomach. It took a moment for him to calm down and he looked at Bill, total adoration in his eyes. "You do the best voices Billy."

Bill smiled, "That one's not sss-so hard, he's kinda like a whiny Alvin the ch-chipmunk."

Georgie laughed again, but the sound of something slamming in the hallways and his father's brash yell interrupted them. "I'm at my whits end here Sharon!"

Georgie jumped in his arms, staring wide-eyed at Bill's closed door. He looked scared. Bill wasn't about to let him settle into that feeling for long, so he tucked Georgie closer to him and asked, "Sss-so if you could be any sss-super hero in the world, who'd you be?"

Georgie took the bait, seeming to forget for the moment about his parents fighting. He turned to Bill and smiled wide, "Batman no question!"

"No question eh?"

"Yeah! He's got all these cool weapons and he doesn't need any powers to kick the Jokers ass!"

"Hey!" He pretended to scold, but he couldn't help but chuckle a little, "Cu-come on, lu-language Georgie."

"But Richie swears all the time!"

"Dear God, please du-don't go taking your cu-cues from Rrr-Richie."

Georgie pouted, crossing his arms and Bill smirked, knowing his mood wouldn't last long. He nudged him playfully and asked, "Who'd I be, then?"

Georgie sat up excitedly—yeah, that didn't last long at all—and he grinned proudly at Bill, "You'd be Superman!"

"Underwear outside mmm-my tights, nu-no thanks."

Georgie rolled his eyes looking comically annoyed, "No, like you're totally indestructible! Nothing can hurt you Billy."

"Nu-no one is indestructible Georgie, even Sss-superman has his krr-kryptonite."

"You are though! You're the strongest person I know!"

Bill sighed, seeming no sense in debating and instead, decided to play along, "I could dig the fff-flying part, I guess."

"I'd totally fly to Disney Land! Where would you go, Billy?"

"Don't know..." Bill shrugged, "probably somewhere fff-far away from here."

A panic stricken expression was suddenly painted on Georgie's face. He shook his head like he wasn't actually hearing this, and scooted closer to

Bill seeming frenzied, "You don't actually mean that Billy!"

Bill furrowed his brows, sitting up worried, "Georgie what's wrong?"

Georgie's looked like he might cry, "You wouldn't just...just...leave forever right?"

"What, no th-that's not what I mmm-meant—"

"I don't want you gone."

"Hey, hey...Georgie, it's ju-just a game we're playing."

"You can't just disappear like that Bill. We're a team."

"Georgie, I know we are. I'm nu-not going anywhere, okay?" He pulled his brother into a hug, "Wherever I go, you go."

...

Ben is looking at him concerned but Bill simply wipes the tears away with the back of his hand. When he's ready, he looks up resolutely. "Georgie needs the Losers more than ever." Bill is staring at Ben, eyes dire and supplicating, "You'll help him, won't you? You and Bev and Mike, you'll make sure he gets passed all this and forgets about me."

"Forgets you?" Ben's expression twists with puzzlement, his brows furrowed in the middle.

" Ben, Georgie can't hold onto these fff-false hopes, like I'm actually coming home. The longer he believes th-that to be true, the worse off he's going to get."

"But, you are coming home Bill..."

"Nu-no...I'm not."

Ben shakes his head, incredulous, "Where is this even coming from?"

Bill swallows, sucking up the courage to explain himself, "Lu-listen, everything th-that's happened, it's all my fff-fault..."

"Bill how can you say that, of course it's not—"

"It all started because of mmm-me Ben, because Robert wanted mmm-me!"

"You can't know that for sure!"

But he does. Ever since that night when Pennywise first laid eyes on him at the party, lancing into his very soul with that hungry and desirous gaze, Bill has known he was the target.

The others; they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's because of him that they're in this mess.

And he thinks on that time when Robert was on a particularly nasty power trip, biting into Bill shoulder and pulling his hair with a vice-like grip, ordering Bill to beg for his cock. Bill had mustered all the resistance inside him, no matter how much pressure Robert would exert. It angered Robert to no end. Even when the man fucked into him, viciously and with absolutely no preparation to stop Bill from screaming his throat bloody—but Bill naively believed anything was better than giving Robert that kind of satisfaction.

Then...the next night, when he came back for more, it wasn't just Bill he wanted anymore. It was Richie. And Bill had known right then and there, that he fucked up—because now his friends were fair game. If Robert was seeking retribution against Bill, then he found it in the Losers.

Richie. Eddie. Stan. They'll keep being hurt because of him—unimaginatively and repeatedly—for simply being his friends.

So it's up to Bill to do right by them; which means he's going to end what's happening in the same way it began; between him Robert. This whole thing has always been about them.

And when the time comes, Bill is going to have to sacrifice something he knows Robert undoubtedly wants from him.

...

"Pu-please listen Ben, the others, they still need you...bu-butt I've accepted I'm not coming out of this with them. Not if I have to stop him."

"I don't understand—

He's gazing sombrely at this vision of his best friend, hoping beyond hope that the real Ben is somehow interconnected, listening and heeding his words—because, he needs Ben to do this one last thing for him.

"Just pu-pu-promise me you'll watch out for Georgie, okay? That you'll protect him and you won't lu-let this consume his life."

"Bill—

"Promise me Ben!" They're both surprised by his outburst. Bill is breathing hard, his heart pounding rapidly in his chest. "I nu-need to know he'll be ta-taken care of," he says, sounding desperate, "That's he-he's going to grr-grow up and put all th-this crap behind him...please Ben."

"Bill," Ben repeats softly, "I promise we'll take care of Georgie. There's no question about that."

Bill nods, letting out a relieved breath. "Thank you," he rasps gratefully, because that all he needed to hear.

There's a beat of silence between them before Bill speaks again. He takes another leap, and whispers nervously, "I'm so sss-sorry for our fight."

Bill is aware the real Ben may never hear these words himself, but there's a small consolation knowing, he could at least say them out loud, to another version of Ben, somewhere.

Ben nods, toying with a thread on his denim shorts, "So am I."

"We never mmm-meant to hurt you, Ben."

Ben looks a little sad and a little sombre. He says, "...it just sucks, you know?"

Bill does know—because, while he could never regret his feelings for Beverly, he wishes that weren't also the reason his friendship with Ben was damaged so terribly.

They go silent again

"She misses you," Ben surprises him by offering.

Bill perks up, eyes wide and heart beating for a much different reason now, "Yeah?" he smirks.

"She's not giving up either," Ben says, "She'll keep on waiting."

That fleeting happy feeling now alters into something melancholy, "I don't want her to wait. She doesn't deserve that."

Ben chuckles, "It's Beverly, Bill. She's not a force to be reckoned with. You really think anyone's going to sway her otherwise?"

Bill frowns, glaring at his hands. He's angry with himself, because he doesn't want that kind of life for anyone he loves—always wondering. Ben reaches over take Bill's hand, seeming to sense the distress lancing through him.

"I don't care what you say." Ben says, pulling him in, and wrapping his arms around Bill. "However long it takes, we're bringing you guys home...all of you."

Ben hugs him tight and Bill allows himself to become lost in the moment, no matter how deceptive it may be. He's not ready to go back. So instead, he listens to the song of imagined birds, perching on the branches close by. He admires the brilliant bed of water and how it laps in glimmering crystal surfs. He commits Ben's touch to memory, the phantom warmth of it because he's been destitute of this feeling for so long and he needs to remember what it's liked to be held by someone who loves him.

Bill buries his face into Ben's shoulder, tears leaking from his eyes. "It's won't be so easy," he whispers shakily, "Robert...he'll never let me go, Ben."

"He won't have a choice," Ben answers vehemently, "Just hold on Bill. The Losers are coming, and then, he doesn't stand a chance against all of us...together."

They stay like that for some time.

Being Peaceful.

Hopeful.

Dreaming.

Bill keeps dreaming...and dreaming...and dreaming...until that awful moment when he isn't.

...

Reality is the worst kind of nightmare.

...

A/N: I want you guys to know the next chapter is probably going to be the worst it's ever going to get. So you can imagine that's a hard thing to write and I'm going to need some time to work on it, so I hope you'll all bear with me and be patient. I'm actually very scared for Bill at this point, and I want to warn everyone that after this chapter...things might not be looking so good.

I may have been crying and listening Ruelle's "Find You" on repeat while writing this chapter. Check it out!

Thanks so much friends! If you have time to leave a comment, please do! Till next time, xoxo

P.S You should also expect some Stenbrough in the next chapter! ;-)

7. Chapter 7: Part One

PLEASE READ: Hi friends! First of all I must point out that this update is only PART ONE of Chapter 7. I really did want to complete this chapter from Bill's perspective, but it was starting to run very long on the word count and the second half was getting increasingly dark the more I continued writing. You can imagine how hard writing this kind of content is, and putting myself into that kind of place can sometimes take a toll. I think I need a break, but I also didn't want to leave you all hanging. I know how much everyone has been anticipating this chapter, and I have every intention to follow up with PART TWO, but it may take some time. Don't worry I am not abandoning! I'm honestly very excited to get to Ben's, Bev's and Mike's perspectives. I'm thinking I may even split the next update to also include Ben's POV, since it's taking longer than I expected to get there. I hope you'll all stick by me through my awful update schedule. I appreciate the support so much and all the kind, motivating words.

With that said, this update is long and will hopefully tide you all over till I can finish PART TWO (which will include some pretty scary stuff). Please proceed with caution, because as I previously mentioned, things will only get worse before they get better... that is, if they get better.

*****Warnings:** Sexual assault, child abuse, violence and forced oral sex. Please protect yourselves and do not continue reading if any of this may trigger you.

Thank you so much for reading everyone and don't forget to let me know what you think by commenting or leaving kudos. It will help me to keep going XOXO

...

This time Bill wakes with a jolt, like being jettisoned brutishly into that rock-hard wall of existence. The soreness comes twofold—in the physical damage to his body, and in a way that can only be described as a bruising whirlwind of emotion. It's like tornado snapshots of his

dream are assaulting him and every recollection is a painful wallop that whips harder than the last.

The ceaseless blue sky brings *hurt*.

The radiance of the quarry brings *despair*.

What's left of Ben's embrace is now a painful pinprick of *longing*.

The seedy air that carries between the concrete walls like noxious fumes have spoiled the comforting, bittersweet dose of his escape. He's choking—suffocating on his sorrow. Tears prickle his eyes and his breathing stutters in his throat.

"Bill?"

He looks down to find Stanley lying there next to him. He's tucked against Bill. A messy head of sandy curls propped under one arm and his knees folded over his chest—all knotted together. Stan drags a cheek against Bill's hip and looks up at him. Unknowingly, he brushes an exposed patch of skin between Bill's t-shirt and jeans. The cellar is never anything but wet and cold but as Stan settles there, the warmth does too. The sensation is a good one, but it's got Bill on edge.

When he spares a glance across the room, he finds Richie spooning Eddie, a hand rested gingerly on his hip. Eve while asleep, Richie's being mindful of their friend's broken arm. Now it's draped up in a makeshift sling, something Bill fashioned with the scraps of Eddie's old *Back to the Future* tee. That's about all they could salvage from what remained of his clothing and Eddie is still cocooned in the blanket. Richie nestles him closer, pressing his nose into the back of Eddie's neck—keeping him warm and bathing in him completely.

It's a surprisingly peaceful moment they're sharing together.

Except, they're exposed like this. The same way they were that night Eddie was hurt. And it makes Bill hyper-aware of the fact that Robert is still vying to also hurt him. He realizes he can't keep giving reason to leverage anyone against him, no worse than he already has. Settling into this deceptive feeling of comfort is dangerous, especially when the moment can be ripped away so entirely.

In the cellar, all good things will inevitably come to a crushing end. His dreams have proven that much. But from here on out, he can at least try to manage how vulnerable he makes himself. He doesn't want Robert to take this too, not if he can control it.

That's why Bill finds himself scooting away from Stan, grudgingly breaking the solace of their shared warmth, because he's learned the hard truth, that keeping his distance might be safer for everyone.

Seeming confused, Stan presses his palm against the cold floor and sits up. He rounds Bill with a worried, upend gaze. His lashes are threaded blond, feathering the air like tumbling silk.

"Are you okay?" he asks Bill.

There's a quiver sitting there in his throat, threatening to expose him but despite himself, Bill nods. He straightens his back against the wall, like he needs confidence to feel bigger.

"M'fine," he lies badly and Stan keeps watching him, eyes like a dark brown hole that's drilled deep.

"You don't look fine."

Bill wants to change the subject. He snorts a fake, pitiable sound like it doesn't completely hurt entirely just to do this. When he reaches up to touch his nose, he hisses through his teeth, grazing his fingertips over the rigid curve that Richie snapped back into place. "Yeah well...Rrr-Richie's not exactly a plastic sss-surgeon, is he?"

Stan sighs, "You know what I meant."

Bill ignores him and makes a move to stand. His skin is still crusted in dry blood and sticky sweat and he needs to wash this layer of gross off him. But he balks instantly; the pain escapes in a sorry whimper. He presses a hand over his bruised ribs, *yeah definitely cracked*, and like a cone of melting ice-cream, the damage starts in his head and oozes right to his toes. Stan shuffles to his feet, meaning to help him but Bill waves him off. "I've got this."

He fucking doesn't. *Is it possible to pass out from pain this bad?* — because that's how he's feeling right now.

"Bill if you'd just let me—

Bill is still bowed over, but he looks up to shoot the other boy a warning. "Don't sss-start with me Stan."

They've always bickered, every since Kindergarten when Stan would do things like explain to Bill, rather eloquently for a five-year-old, that Zebra's didn't have polka dots and he was drawing them completely wrong.

Only difference now is Bill's not a kid anymore, and he doesn't need Stan observing his every waking move and acting like Bill doesn't know his own limits.

He breathes long and hard through his nose, feeling the pinch there too. He moves slower this time, scrunching his eyes as he forces his brain to work against his wailing limbs.

"Bill..." Stan says, tone braided in a fusion of worry and annoyance, "Theirs no shame in asking for help."

Bill scoffs, "Because you're sss-so good at that rrr-right?"

Stan's blanches. He veers back, looking hurt like the person he least expected has just punched him in the gut.

And *fucking shit* because Bill didn't mean to say that, but now it's out there and they have to face it. Robert has certainly worked a number of them. He's been playing his role as the evil artist. Breaking them down and painting their strong foundation with caliginous watercolours, damaging their very fibre and leaving behind stringy grey strokes that seep into the frayed canvas of their friendship.

It's why Eddie hasn't been able to meet Stan's eyes since the attack, or how Richie took Stan by his collar while Eddie was still cleaning up, slammed him into the wall and cried like he'd just lost a friend.

It's why a part of Bill—a bitterly resentful part—looks at Stan and sees only the boy who let them down. A boy better off then the rest of them. And he can't help but lash out at this disappointing someone standing before him.

He should know better, *he wants too*, and he hates himself for feeding into Robert's disgusting vision of them.

Fuck. He just needs to remember what it's like to see colour again—a kaleidoscope of friendship.

He opens his mouth to say something—he's not sure what yet—but Stan surprisingly works faster, "I can help now."

He's touching Bill's sleeve, whispering the next part, "will you let me help?" And he looks up at him with such full-hearted eyes, "Please Bill."

Bill's heart kicks up a beat and he doesn't know why. He nods despite himself. Stan tucks a hand under his arm, urging them up. They walk slowly to the bathroom, manoeuvring around Eddie and Richie with timid steps. Once inside, Stan shuts the door and Bill gets the light. It flickers, as always.

Stan is standing with his back pressed against the door, biting his lip as he stares at Bill. Neither is certain what to say but eventually Bill breaks the silence.

"I'm sss-sorry," he tries and it's the truth. He wants to make amends, especially after notices the tear dancing down Stan's cheek, "Stanny I didn't mmm-mean—"

"No, you're right," Stan injects. He draws forth a shaky breath, "There was so much I could have done. I should have tried—"

"Bu-but you were sss-scared. I get th-that, I do..."

"We were all scared, Bill. But that's never stopped any of you."

"It's not you're fff-fault, no one knows wh-what would have happened. You could have been hurt too—"

"Don't you get it, that's what makes this worse!" Stan shakes his head and twists his features, abashed. "I thought he was gonna' take me. I really did!" More tears slip down his face, heavy like rivulets, "he was laughing and coming at me and I felt...so...so...small...but then you were there and I was—*fuck* I was relieved Bill. Can you fucking

believe that? I was actually relieved because he wasn't focused on me anymore."

Bill listens; heart lurching in his chest as Stan tries explaining himself. "I'm so fucking ashamed and I know I can never take it back...but...I can't—I can't fucking take you all hating me. I just—I'm so fucking sorry Bill! I'm sorry—I'm sorry—I'm sorry!" Stan cries like a carnival ride that won't end—each sob climbing high and howling with the force of his plummeting emotions.

Bill's wants to kick himself for ever making Stan feel this alone. He sees the honest to God fear of losing his friends rampant in Stan's bloodshot eyes and he thinks even Robert could never incite this reaction. It's that look that's got the reasonable part of Bill brimming to the surface, dissolving away that bitter pill he's been choking on.

"I du-don't hate you," he tells Stan, and it's always been the truth. In his heart he knows, he could never actually be angry with the boy before him.

...

The same little boy who would once blow on Bill's 'boo boos' and tear a piece off his own shirt sleeve off, just to wrap up Bill's knee—even if that meant his daddy would ground him later.

...

Bill of all people should understand what fear can do to a person, how hideously paralyzing it can be. What Stan did, it was such a human reaction and he can't blame him for acting on his instinct, to self-preserve and retreat from evil steering its ugly head.

Bill limps over. Still holding his side, he draws Stan into an awkward, one-armed hug. Stan sniffles, resting a cheek on his shoulder and clutching him back.

"Rrr-Robert the one who did this to us." Bill tells him and he pulls back to take a good look at Stan. "Not you."

Stan hiccups, "Bu-but if I'd only just—"

"No." Bill affirms, stopping him before he's got the chance to entertain the thought. "Look I'm trrr-trying to remind myself this is exactly what he wants. Don't you sss-see Stan, we're all just cogs to him. He's rrr-running the show. Trying to ta-turn us against each other." He reaches up, and wraps a hand across the back of Stan's neck, "We can't let him ch-cha-change us, alright?"

"Alright." Stan whisper repeats, "Alright I'm with you." He rubs a rough hand over his eyes, dragging the skin with him and draws in a breath, "I won't let you down again Bill, any of you. I swear it."

Bill manages a weak smirk. "I know Stanny. I believe you."

Stan turns against his touch, to gaze at the door. He asks sadly, "Will they ever speak to me again?"

Bill can't speak for Eddie and Richie but dear God he hopes so, because they've never been anything but a unit—a flourishing and boundless garden that grows together. But alone, they're all but tangled weeds for Robert to rip out root and stem. They need to stand together if they've got any hope at all.

"Th-they'll come around," Bill answers him, hoping his tone isn't betraying his lack of confidence, "They just need tu-tu-time."

Stan's nods, but he's got this look about him, like he's still battling his worst demons.

They fall quiet again. It takes a moment before Stan comes back to himself and he shakes his head awkwardly, like he's remembering something, "So I guess I should leave you to it..." but he hovers by the door, checking in with Bill one last time, "unless you need more help?" he offers, blushing.

Bill nods, like he'll be fine but as takes a step back toward the tub, his wince gives him away. "Actually.." He's learned now when to suck up his pride, "mmm-maybe I kinda' do."

Stan blinks, seeming surprised but quickly snaps into action. "Uhh sure, what can I do?"

"My shh-shirt. Can you help mmm-mm-me get it off?"

"Can you lift your arms?"

Bill nods and Stan steps up to help him. He groans as he hoists his arms in the air. Stan takes hold of his damp shirt, rolling up the hem and peeling it up his chest in a fluid and careful gesture. Bill sighs as the fabric comes over his head, already feeling better, but flushes when he notices Stan taking him in. His eyes are wide and unsettlingly troubled as they rake over his body. Bill's covered in a brutal display of splotchy purple bruises, carrying from his torso all the way up to his neck. His skin is split by jagged cuts all over, but the worst is a nasty gash just below his left rib where Robert stuck him with the knife. The smears of blood paint a telling story on his skin.

Stan clenches his jaw, like it's taking a lot of effort to contain himself. "Bill..."

Bill scratches the back of his head, chastened. "Yeah...I know. I'm a mmm-mess aren't I?" He's got the gull to actually chuckle, but there's no humour there. It's a desperate, save face attempt to keep from losing his own composure because seeing himself right now, after all Robert's 'special attention' has Bill feeling really fucking awful.

God he's being an idiot. Stan can't see him lose his shit. *No fucking way.* But Bill thinks if Stan doesn't say something soon, *like right fucking now*, he might start crying.

Thankfully, Stan rises to the occasion.

"You can't keep going like this."

He does something that surprises Bill. He reaches out and touches Bill's skin with velvety fingertips that draw goose bumps on Bill's skin. Stan's hands are soft, not calloused like Roberts and his touch his gentle. Maybe even more so than dream Ben's was. This time, Bill doesn't find himself pulling away. He's almost swaying, like Stan's a ruffling wind, and Bill's the tree caught in his updraft.

Stan's not looking at him. He just grazes his fingertips over each and every bruise, like he's hoping they'll vanish under his touch.

"I'm scared one day you'll push him too far."

Bill feels pinpricks of shared fear, though he tries his best to reason, "I can't just sss-sss-sit by while he hrr-hurts any of you..." but then he catches himself, hoping Stan won't take that the wrong way. "I didn't mean—"

"I know. I'm not...that's not what I was thinking." He shakes his head and rattles some tears loose. "But one day he won't bring you back. And what happens then?"

He looks up—an anxious, crestfallen display. "You're cut from the best of them Bill..."

Bill keeps listening, feeling while Stan's words make his heart skip a beat.

"The world will fall off its axis. Stars will explode. The sun will burn out and asteroids are gonna' rain down if you die! All of this, everything that's happening now, it'll all be for nothing. Don't you get that?"

Bill swallows against his sandpaper throat, no idea what to say, "Stan I—"

"That's not what we need right now," Stan injects. "We need our leader, *Big Bill*. Not to go throwing yourself on a sword, but to fucking live. Maybe that means we're weak or selfish or I don't know...but we're not going to make it through this without you."

Bill feels like an idiot. He's never stopped to consider how his own death might devastate the Losers. He's been staring through this fish-eye lens—a warped outlook where he's not worth a second glance. He's just been so focused on trying to ensure the safety of his friends that he's forgotten they need him too.

They've always been like troop, and now, they've even more reason to flank each other. Bill's always pictured *them* breaching through smoke and trenches, crawling into clearer air and blue skies without him. He's never known a scenario where he makes it past the worst. He's always stayed trapped in his own head—battling those thoughts

—a ceaseless blackness.

"I can see it in your eyes that you're losing hope..."

Stan places his palms on Bill's shoulders and shakes him a little. Bill's comes out of it. His cheeks heat up and his skin is buzzing where Stan's still touching him. "You've got to keep fighting Bill, but for yourself especially."

Tears gather in Bill's eyes—bulbs of glassy liquid that shatter when he blinks. He breathes deep and takes a leap, "I can try."

Stan's doesn't look entirely relieved, but Bill notices his expression soften. "Okay..." he nods, "okay that's all I ask."

They keep touching. Bill's got his hand on Stan's waste and he wonders if he should be the first to break their connection. Though, he's in no rush to make a move.

Stan is giving him an unreadable look. He bites his bottom lip, a tick he's never been able to shake. He looks like his brain is rolling a mile a minute—an engine mind. He's not sure what Stan's thinking, but theirs seeded conflict and a sudden lack of confidence that's got him looking scared again.

He opens his mouth to finally speak. "Bill..." he croak out, "can I ask you favour?"

Bill is thrown by the waver in Stan's tone and his brows knit in the middle questioningly, "Uhhh...shh-sure. What is it?"

"Can I...umm..." his voice is sounding more higher-pitch than normal, and then he comes out and says it, "can...I kiss you?"

Bill's cheeks flush a deep crimson. He's not sure what he expected Stan to say, but sure, as heck wasn't that. For a moment, time just stands still. Bill thinks he hears his own heartbeat, pounding in his eardrums. He might be hearing Stan's too. Their pulses are roaring in time with each other. He feels sweat gather on his palms. All he can do is stare at Stan, mouth agape because, *what is even happening right now?*

Stan drops his gaze, sucking in a hitched breath, like he's taken Bill's silence as his answer. He looks destroyed and keeps staring at the ground, letting out a paltry laugh that tangles at its tail. "You know what, just forget about it. That was stupid." He's tripping over his words, taking a clumsy step toward the door and not looking Bill in the eye. "I'll uhh...I'm just...I'll leave you alone."

Stan takes his palms with him, and the lack of sensation is what snaps Bill properly into the moment. He can't let Stan walk away like this. *No way*, he has to know where this is coming from.

He shakes his head and reaches out, grabbing Stan's hand to stop him in his tracks.

"Wait Sss-Stan...don't go...I just...I'm sss-su-surprised, is all."

His free hand comes up and Stan pinches his nose. Squinting really hard like he's got a headache from how painful this is. "No Bill, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have even said anything..."

"Then why du-du-did you?" Bill asks softly, "Why do you wa-want to kiss mmm-me?"

"I just..." And he trails off, looking at the wall like it's easier to focus on anything besides Bill right now.

Bill squeezes his hand, "Come on Stanny. Ta-talk to mmm-me, will you?"

Stan swallows against the lump in his throat. "I've never kissed anyone before ..." When he looks up finally, there are fresh tears in his eyes, "I don't want *him* to be the first person to touch me like that. I want...I want it to be with someone I...*like*."

He's starts rubbing his arm, hugging himself like he needs shielding from his own truth.

Those words fall into place like puzzle pieces, forming a picture of the real Stan. He's never mentioned liking boys like that, but Bill's always had his suspicions. He thinks those same suspicions is what drives the Rabbi to set Stan up on dates with girls from his synagogue. Or how Stan visibly stiffens anytime Richie would do

something like smack a wet kiss on his cheek in public. Sometimes Bill would even find Stan eyeing other boys in the locker room and turning a beet red whenever Stan realized Bill had caught him staring.

Though Bill never flat out questioned him about it, or pushed Stan into admitting anything. Deep down he'd hoped they're friendship was enough for Stan to want to confide in him. Now here they are, and Bill feels like an absolute dick for being completely speechless in the moment, because he never expected Stan to also admit his feelings for Bill.

Now he's wondering why he never caught on sooner, because he remembers the night of the play. How Stan had gotten so quiet backstage when Bill had kissed Beverly after the first act of Romeo and Juliet. Bill was oblivious, had chalked up Stan's bad mood with the boredom of his job as stagehand. But now he's realizing it wasn't just Ben who was upset that night.

"You don't have to like me back..." Stan says, interrupting his still processing thoughts. "I know you and Bev..." he says, trailing off and looking like it hurts to even say the words.

Hearing Bev's name has Bill feeling all kinds of conflicted. He's always been so sure about his feelings for her. *Bev* with her fierce blue eyes and feathery red hair that Bill loved to run his fingers through. Or the sound of her laugh, that made Bill forget how to breath and carried like skipping rocks across the quarry water.

Maybe, it's remembering those moments with Bev that now have Bill understanding Stan better than ever.

Stan wants to know what it's like to kiss someone with feeling—to share that moment willingly and have someone share it back.

He remembers how special it was, to kiss Beverly for the first time. The feeling was electric as she pushed him behind a bolder, concealed them from their friends prying eyes, and closed the distance between them. Her glistening freckled body creasing the water like gentle folds of tissue paper.

Her breath was pink roses and cotton candy. Her nostrils puckered cutely and she whispered against his lips, "*Since I obviously can't count on you doing this yourself Denbrough...*" before leaning in and drawing him in with her mouth. It was exhilarating and full of vibrant want. They kissed with trust and longing—exactly the way it was supposed to be.

And Bill's so fucking grateful to Bev for making the first move because he doesn't think he could have. It's because of her that Robert never got the chance to claim that moment for himself. Bill knows the memory would have been much different if he had.

There's no way he's going to let that happen to Stan. He can't stand the idea of Robert taking Stan's first kiss like he takes everything else. Pressing into his friend with bruising lips, gnashing teeth and a probing tongue, forcing it's way into Stan's mouth and licking the innocence from him.

He's going to do this for Stan—with Stan—because he won't let his first kiss be with anyone less than someone who loves him.

Bill steps closer, pulling Stan over to him. "C'mere," he whispers.

They're suddenly flush against each other. They're about the same height, and their eyes meet in the middle. Stan's eyes are wide. His pupils stutter, reminding Bill of two black ponds, lapping in the wind. Their breathing quickens, hot puffs of air collecting between them.

"You don't have to do this Bill."

Bill let's go of his ribs and brings his hand up to touch Stan's face. Stan eyes him the entire way. He swallows like it takes effort—like he's trying to keep his emotions at bay.

"Du-don't be nervous," Bill tells him, despite his own raving heart.

Stan chokes out a breathy laugh, "Easy to say..."

"It's just you and mmm-me Stanny."

And then he's leaning in.

Slowly and carefully he cranes his neck, tipping his head toward Stan's. Their lips touch like pink beds of softness, playfully parting against each other. His nose hurts, but the kiss feels deliciously warm and right, and Bill focuses on working them through it. His movements are languid and full of ease against Stan's wet lips. They feed into each other, melding perfectly. They're lulling together, *floating*, in a special place forged only between them.

When they come apart, it's only to take a breath. For that moment, Bill can see Stan's pupils are blown out, raving with all kinds of wanton feelings. He leans in again, this time with more confidence. Stan's getting more demanding, taking Bill's face between his palms to kiss him back. The second kiss is deeper, a clumsy display of tongue. It feels like a little man is doing backflips in his stomach, like Bill's nerves are humming with Stanley, and he's not sure what that means, but *fuck*, if it doesn't also feel completely amazing.

Stanley gasps into his mouth, "I love you Bill."

He's heard those words before, for the first time in a bathroom not like this one and by someone else entirely.

...

They were in his parents' bathroom, back home—the day of the party. Bev was leaning against the sink and grinning coyly at him. It was after they'd finally convinced Georgie to quit hiding in the bathtub, and just go ahead and speak to the little girl with pigtails he liked so much. Once Georgie had muscled the courage rejoin his party, it was just the two of them left behind. Bev had walked up to him, licking her thumb and drawing it over the rainbow butterfly she painted on his face earlier. Swiping it off, and cupping his cheek. That's when she said it, "*You're a good brother Bill, and I love you...*"

...

He hasn't forgotten Bev.

Just like he could never forget Ben, standing under a street lamp on Jackson Street and shouting at him that same night, "*You'll just hurt her!*"

He remembers himself, furiously shouting back, "*I love her too, Ben!*"

He meant every word and *damn it*, he knows he still does.

"*She'll keep on waiting*," he hears dream Ben, reminding him of Beverly's unspoken oath and the guilt knots inside him, bounds up tight into a heavy ball of bad feelings in his gut. The next moment Bill's breaking their kiss. Pulling away too soon for either boy. They're both shocked, heaving still from the rapture of their shared moment, and still holding each other's faces.

"I'm sss-sorry," Bill chokes out, overcome. "Jesus...I'm sorry Stan." His lips tremble and his shoulders start shaking and before he knows it, he's crying.

Stan says nothing, just rubs his thumb over Bill's cheek with a touch that's brilliantly soft. He leans in again. Stupidly, Bill thinks he's coming in for a third kiss but of course, that doesn't happen.

He hugs Bill instead, holding him as tight as he can without making Bill's wounds hurt worse. Unlike his dream, this moment is real. Bill feels Stan press his lips against his ear. He shushes and soothes him.

"Thank you," Stan whispers to him.

He doesn't sound sad anymore, not like Bill expected. *No*, there's a lighter air to his words, like there's no longer a storm cloud following and waiting to thunder. "You're a good friend Bill."

...

After Stan leaves, he spends a long time in the tub. Imagining what it'd be like to slip below the surface and stay there.

He tries it just to see.

Dips deep in the water and hold his breath for as long as he can.

Everything is blue and quiet and swollen.

A minute is his longest record.

Eventually he splashes back up, gasping for air, wishing he were better at losing the battle.

...

"He's coming!" Is what Richie tells him, bursting through the bathroom door like a reckoned force just as Bill pulls his jeans back on. His eyes are rife—a cluster bomb of panic behind his muddy orbs. He's breathing like he's just run a marathon and Bill thinks the ground tremors from Richie's erratic heartbeat. They stare at each other; feeling while the panic douses them, darkening them, like waves rolling over beach stones. Bill nods. Bites into his tongue till he taste blood. He runs a stressed hand through his damp hair. A draft prickles against his exposed back. It seeps from the cold and crumbling cellar blocks, drubbing up goose bumps on his skin—a primal warning of what's to come.

He's not ready. He doesn't think he'll ever be. "Give me a sss-sec," he tells Richie and his friend leaves, rounding the corner to be with the others. He doesn't have long, so he picks his bloodied shirt up off the floor. His mind rages like a roaring fire. His anger is hyped, signalling though synapses' and into his fingertips. He twists and balls the fabric in his fists, harshly and violently—wanting something to stand as much cruelty as they do. He's gasps, with rancid gulps of stale air and whips his t-shirt into the draining tub.

It's so fucking unfair!

There's a sliver of sunlight, peaking through a boarded and barred window, just above the tub, mocking him. A reminder that life keeps moving on without them. Outside these four walls there are kids, going about their daily lives—laughing and playing with their friends. Sharing meals with their families.

Bill's forgotten what it's like to feel the sun on his face. To smile like he truly means it and be blissfully unaware of the bad things happening in the world.

If he tries hard, maybe he can catch glimpses of that life—in those dreams that are too short and in flashes of memories that keep slipping between blinks.

But Robert is always happy to remind him of what he's good for.

Good boys soak up sunlight.

Rag dolls know only forced sex in dark places.

...

They're exactly as they were last night — in the same formation with Robert standing before them. Evil tilts his head, appraising them with a wormy smile. It's a *harrowing deja vu*. Bill feels Stan stroking his palm with his thumb but he's shaking, unlike earlier. He sees Richie, a downcast gaze and clenched fists at his side. He sees Eddie, tightening the blanket around him, swathed in his own nerves.

Bill arms himself with a loathly glare, shooting daggers at Robert and hating him for succumbing them to these barely versions of themselves. He feel like cornered cattle, carolled for the slaughter.

"Hello boys," Robert says, his syrupy drawl oozes from waxy red lips. He's hybrid Robert today. Somewhere between man and clown. Wearing ordinary draggle-tailed clothes. Jeans scuffed at the knees, and a wrinkled white tee that rimed with silt. He's still got a melting portrait of Pennywise painted on, paint smeared by sweat and cracking where his hairline departs. He looks dishevelled, like he's been busy at work.

Doing what? Bill doesn't want to know.

Robert carries with him, two duffel bags. The first Bill's never seen before. It's born of black leather and looks hefty—like half the size of Bill's entire body. It's bloated and lumpy, and Robert's leaning to one side, like whatever's inside is weighing him down.

It's reeks, something fierce with an acrid but familiar scent, almost like rusted pennies. Bill keeps eyeing the duffel, knitting his brows to try and make sense of it.

Robert rolls his strained shoulder and drops the bag with a dull thud. Something sloshes inside, sounding a lot like soaked sneakers after a rainstorm. For some reason, this unsettles Bill even worse, but he's not sure why yet.

Robert rights the other bag in his grip, tightening a fist around the strap. He lifts the duffel toward them, harbouring an offering, "Hungry boys?"

Bill recognizes *this* bag. It's worn green with yellow straps. It swings in Robert's grip, the sound of metal clanking against metal from inside. Every couple of weeks, Robert will fill it with non-perishables. A mixture of dried and canned foods that are supposed to last them through extended days of his absence.

Though they're always running dangerously low on enough food for all of them. The past few days have been particularly bad. They've been getting by on rationing the last, crummy bits of a stale bag of Cheerio's. Bill can taste his mouth salivating at the mere thought of more. The growl begins in his stomach and rankles its way through him like a shriek travelling between the bulwarks of a cavern in the barrens. The sound hampers his insides, sounding hollow in his empty stomach.

He's almost excited to see the bag, looking full with new supplies—like he's been trained to want for Robert's return. Since, at least that means he and his friends won't die of starvation. It's really a fucked up, sickening feeling to realize how desperately they need someone they hate.

No one makes a move for the bag—each boy stays unnaturally still. They don't answer Robert either, but Bill thinks it's their famished eyes and ravening stomachs that give them away.

"That's what I thought," Robert says triumphantly. He drops the bag and they flinch when it hits the ground with a *WHACK!* He crouches and unzips the top compartment. Reaching inside, he rustles around the cans and snack boxes, "But first..."

He digs for a few seconds, a burrowing rat, before he comes up with a pile of rumpled clothing.

Sometimes he'll do this too, bring them something clean to wear from the clothes he's collected over time. Their usually pulled, stained and holed up garbs, that Bill suspects belonged to the children who came before them. They tell years and years of horror stories.

He holds a pink sweatshirt and a pair of blue joggers. When he stands, the smile never leaves his lips and Robert walks toward them. His eyes zero in on Eddie.

"Want these, don't you Eddie?"

Eddie looks like he's already on the verge of tears. He bites his lip and averts his gaze, unable to look Robert in the eye after what's happened. Richie pinches Eddie's blanket from behind, making a subtle move to tug Eddie a little further behind him. Robert doesn't seem to notice this but just in case, Bill touches Richie's wrist, reminding him to stay quiet. They know Robert's just itching for a reason to escalate things and Bill is hoping they can ride out the calm before the inevitable storm for as long as possible.

Robert holds the clothes out for Eddie, but he doesn't dare move. Robert chuckles in response, wagging the pile around in Eddie's face. "Come on then. Take it! Take it!"

Eddie swallows, he glances at his friends, looking totally unsure. Bill sneaks him a nod, hoping to pass some semblance of courage between them. It's enough, because Eddie pokes his good arm through the blanket, eyes darting between Robert and the clothing nervously, before he scoops them up and clutches them against his chest.

"What do you say?"

Eddie rounds his shoulders, looking smaller than he is—if that's even possible.

"Thank you," he whispers, and he sounds so disgusted with himself. Bill wishes he could crawl into Eddie's skin and do this for him.

A beat of silence passes and Robert crosses his arms, continuing to stare at Eddie. They don't know what the man's playing at. He's just keeps smiling, like he's waiting for something.

After a moment, they get their answer.

"Put them on," Robert says, sounding husky. He's standing on his own diving board, bouncing on the high he gets from Eddie's mortified

expression, soaking it up before taking the full plunge.

"Here?" Eddie croaks.

"Oh yes!" Robert answers, and he raises his chin at the bundle of clothing. "Go on."

Richie still has his hand cradled on Eddie's back and Bill can see, from a sidelong glance, he's using his palm to sooth small circles there. Silently trying to help keep Eddie together.

"Don't be so shy Eddie. I've already seen all your bits."

Eddie flushes red, staring at Robert with watery eyes.

Robert grins at him, but Bill notices his lip twitch involuntarily at the corner. Like he's losing patience. In a deceptively pleasant tone he says, "I'm being very nice. You don't want that changing now, do you?"

Eddie's eyes widen and he shakes his head, but still doesn't move. He keeps the blanket around him and Robert isn't having any of it.

"Edddddie!" His voice judders and Robert stomps his sole into the ground, pounds against it, like a child having a tantrum, "I'M WAAAAAAITING!"

Eddie's fear kicks into over drive. He steps back and collides with Richie chest. Richie is quick to steady them both, wrapping an arm around Eddie, holding him like he wants to hide Eddie' from from Robert's hungry view.

Except there's no hiding this and Eddie is inconsolable. He turns into Richie's chest and buries himself there, consumed by his sobs.

There are tears leaking from Richie's eyes also. But he's not worried about himself. He strokes Eddie's hair, whispering things only they can hear, trying to calm Eddie down.

Bill's heart is breaking for them. He wants to step up, but feels Stan clutching his hand and his nails piercing into Bill's palms, needing him too. He's not even sure what to do, considering how worse things

got the last time.

Richie looks up at Robert with entreating eyes, "Can he just go to the bathroom?"

Robert snorts, and Richie tries again, so desperate. "Please, Mr. Gray!"

Robert steps toward them and reaches to steal Eddie away. He grabs Eddie by his bad arm and jerks his grip, forcing a pained cry from their friend.

"NO! NO! DON'T TOUCH HIM—

That does it! Bill is staring through a veil of blinding anger. Just as he's gearing to throw himself between Robert and his friends once again, Richie falls into action quicker.

"HE'LL DO IT!"

They all freeze. Robert's still clutching Eddie's arm and Richie's still holding Eddie against him. They're in a human tug of war. Richie glares at Robert, long and hard, breathing heavy.

"He'll fucking do it," he spits out.

Robert releases his hold and steps back, waiting. Richie turns back to Eddie. He holds him by the arms, and gently peels them apart. The two boys stare into each other's eyes, loops of love and pain being conveyed all at once.

"You can do this." Richie drags his thumbs over Eddie's face to wipe away his tears. "I'm right here," Richie tells him softly.

Eddie hiccups, sucking in shallow breaths. He nods and they begrudgingly step apart. Eddie turns to face Robert, trembling like a little leaf. Robert smirks down at him, waiting. The air is tight around them, poised like a rubber band that's ready to snap.

Eddie needs to make a move soon. His forehead is glistening with nervous sweat. He swallows a lump, his breathing haggard as he releases hold on the blanket. It drapes down his body, crumpling at his feet.

Bill looks away, staring only at the floor while this is happening.

He can hear Eddie sniffing. He groans a few times, shuffles about while he tries to manoeuvre into the clothes with his broken arm.

But Robert stops him and Bill watches his feet slap forward. He hears Eddie whimper, like maybe the man is touching him again. "Who did this for you?"

Eddie doesn't answer him, and there's another rough sound, like Robert's just grabbed him. "Bu-Bill...Bill did it!"

Bill looks up when he hears his name. He sees Eddie's dressed now, wearing the sweatpants and sweater, as Robert deemed. Except Robert got the fabric shucked up in his grip and he's examining Eddie's sling. He stares at it for a moment, eyes bulging and unreadable.

His smirk is gone and he's frowning. He rolls his neck, and it cracks *one, two, three* times before he turns his head. His eyes land on Bill.

He drops Eddie's shirt and leaves him. Eddie is scared, shooting Bill a rueful glance as Robert walks his way. Bill shakes out of Stan's grip, not needing Robert to notice whatever shift has happened between them. His stomach pedals uneasily and he shivers as Robert comes to a halt and leans into him. He sucks in a breath close to Bill's face.

"Well ain't you resourceful," he mocks, needling Bill with a tone that is bitterly prickled.

Bill stares up at him. He can hear blood rushing through his ears, like the sound of hale hitting the wood panes of a rooftop. He tries to confront Robert boldly, prays his voice won't falter and give him away, "I du-did what I had too."

Robert chuckles a deep-throated, gravelly sound.

"What a good friend."

He backs up, keeping his eyes on Bill till he's back beside the green duffel. "Wonder what else Billy Boy would do for his little Losers."

Tension radiates between Bill and his friends. They look between each other, and they're watching him, anxious and stricken, but not for their sakes.

Robert crouches and starts rifling through the green duffel again. He comes up with a small, red tin can that reads ***Vienna Sausages***.

He stands, and they watch Robert toss the can in the air, smiling wide when he catches it. "I love these things," he offers with no prompting. He snaps the key and peels the lid back. The meaty scent carries through the cellar, mingling with the rancid black duffel that's still lying in a corner. The stench stings Bill's eyes.

Robert plucks a sausage from the can and bites into it. He chews loudly and ferociously, humming like it's the best thing he's ever tasted.

"You gotta' try em!"

He steps up to Bill and then he's tilting the can, spilling the sausages between them, letting them splat to the floor in a mix of murky yellow brine and dusty concrete. Bill looks down at the mess, and back up at Robert who's grinning at him madly. "Hungry, ain't ya?"

Bill doesn't care how true that was before. He'd rather fucking die than scrounge at Robert's feet.

Though Robert is having so much fun with this. He steps right up to Bill, squishing some sausage with his sole. Chunks of the stuff are still pressed between his teeth.

"You could do for some meat on your bones."

He touches Bill with cold and callused fingertips and Bill sucks in a breath as Robert strokes a line up his torso. "I can see your ribs Billy," and he pinches into the curve of Bill's side, pressing hard into the worst bruise. Bill gasps and keens in pain. He drops to his knees, clutching himself.

His friends call out to him, "Bill!" But he raises a hand and halts them before they can intervene. He doesn't want anyone being dragged into this on account of him, *not again*.

"Go on Billy Boy! Have your fill!" Robert kicks a sausage toward him and Bill looks up, glaring at Robert through his auburn lashes.

"No?" Robert taunts, and he grabs a handful of Bill's hair, yanking his head back so he's forced to see his friends. He gulps against his strained throat, eyes darting between them. They're all watching with terrified eyes.

Robers leans down and presses his cheek against Bill's. He teases, "Since you're being so picky. How's about I let them starve then, hmm? Three little skeleton boys! Oh, how they'd wither. Ashes to dust and all that fun stuff!" He turns his face, biting Bills earlobe and pulling it between his teeth. Bill tries shaking him off and Robert's lets loose. He presses his lips to Bill's neck instead, breathing heavy against Bill's skin, "That what you want Billy? To be all alone. Just you and me."

A sob punches through his chest; the idea that he'd be responsible for his friends' undoing is too overwhelming and he can't bear the thought of it. He blinks out tears and tries shaking his head at Robert. Tries to show, he'll cooperate. Because he'll do anything at his point, *fucking debase himself* over and over, he doesn't care, so long as they're alive at the end of this.

Robert grins at him, heaving Bill forward and he lands on his palms, the sausage brine stinging into his skin.

"Get to it then," Robert orders him.

Bill breathes hard, tears trickle of his chin as he stares down at the revolting mess before him. His stomach churns, begging him not to do it. But he extends a shaking hand toward one of the pink nightmares—

"No! No! Not like that!" Robert lambastes, stepping onto his hand and slamming it to the ground. Bill feels a finger snap and cries out when the pain ripples through his nerves sharply. He drops the sausage and it rolls across the floor. "Good little pets eat with their mouths," Robert jests and he's pushing Bill down by his neck, forcing his face into the concrete, smearing his lips into the brine.

"Fucking bastard!" He hears Richie yell, every word seething with a fevered rage. There's a scuffle, like he's stepping up and maybe even being held back by one of the others.

"Rrr-Richie don't!" Bill shouts through gritted teeth, trying to stop Richie from doing something they'll all regret. But there's no authority in it. His tone wavers and words slip through, sounding completely unhinged. He keeps trying, despite himself, "Pu-please don't!"

The commotion quietens, but he hears Richie struggling to restrain himself, a whimper and curse thrown from his lips.

"Looks like no one's coming to your rescue Billy." Robert is jeering, jerking his grip on Bill's hair, "So why don't you just eat up. All of it!"

...

He battles against his rejecting senses and swallows down the bile every step of the way. When he's licked up the last of it, Bill gasps, a pathetic moan of relief. He's grateful for managing to keep it all down, because there's no doubt Robert would have only made him lap up his own mess.

Robert is clapping his hands, gleefully singing with wicked laughter. Bill presses his forearms into the concrete, and slowly ambles himself up. His body aches and screams so he stays on his knees, trying to gather himself. He finds his friends staring at him, looking so fucking wrecked after what they've just witnessed.

Bill tries to show them he's okay, tries to hold a measure of composure in his gaze but he can't even manage that, knowing what they've had to endure with him. There's water brimming in his eyes again, and it's hard to keep looking their way. So he peers at the ground instead. Finds a stain there—a dried dollop of brown. *Blood...* maybe his own.

Robert heaves like a donkey on helium. When he's caught his breath, he holds a hand to his stomach and peers at Bill, with a harrying gape.

"Yummy?"

Bill considers spitting at his feet but thinks better of it, knowing that will only lead downhill fast. He forces himself to nod, but clearly that's still not enough.

"I asked you a question."

"Yes," he mutters, despite himself.

Robert snags his hair again, a vicious habit. He forces Bill to look at him, smiling lecherously down at him, "Yes what?"

"Yes...Mmm-Mr. Gray."

"You look so good down there." Robert leans in, snapping his jaws at Bill, "Working that mouth. Sucking up all that sausage..."

It feels like his heart's been plunged into dry ice, distended in his chest with frigid blood. He thinks someone could take a sledgehammer to it, shatter it into a million pieces because he's reading every layered meaning to Robert's words and there's no question what's coming next.

But he's never had to do this in front of his friends and his ears are burning with white-hot shame at the mere thought of it.

Robert reaches to undo his zipper, and Bill can't help himself, tugging against the man's hold, trying to break their connection and get away. Robert twists his grip and Bill hisses.

"Ah ah, not going anywhere." Robert waggles a finger at him and then his hand darts forward. He squeezes Bill's cheeks, forcing his mouth open.

He hears a dam burst behind him and his friends are hauled into the torrent. Their sobs expelling, wave after throttling wave. It's over their heads now—the power of their powerlessness, and they're drowning in complete grief.

Robert sticks a finger in Bill's mouth, like he's testing the waters. Bill bites down, *hard*, and Robert yelps. It's a small victory, but a reckless

one. Robert rips his hand away, and his anger is bristling. He snarls and finishes undoing himself. In a shaking, untamed gesture, he reaches into his jeans and pulls out. His veiny, swollen cock stares Bill angrily in the face. Bill retches and pierces his lips, defiant, turning his head this way and that to try and dodge Robert thrusts.

"Open wide Billy Boy." He tightens his grip on Bill's hair, forcing his head still, "Or I'll flay the skin of their bones and hey! I'll even let you watch!"

That stops him completely, his fight falling to the wayside. Robert senses the shift and his cherry lips coil up, like a tangled bowtie, "Atta' boy."

Bill can still taste brine salty on his tongue. His tears streak down in pairs, marking racetracks down his cheeks, but with no end in sight. He closes his eyes and opens his mouth to relent. He thinks wordlessly of the small black spider he'd often see, scuttling through crevices in the cellar walls, infinitely free to come and go where it pleases. He envies it, wishing he could be like that—absolutely anywhere outside himself right now.

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Please review if you have time. I really appreciate it!

8. Chapter 7: Part Two

A/N:PLEASE READ: Okay friends, so here it is after all this time. Part two, as promised. Guys...this is probably the darkest, most horrific thing I've ever written and I'm honestly a littler terrified sharing it with you. I don't consider this chapter explicit but it is graphic and so for that reason, you'll notice I removed the "Non-graphic Rape/Non Con" tag to be safe. I want to protect my readers and make sure none of you are triggered because I wasn't careful enough.

This was extremely hard to write. I sat down and stopped myself multiple times because it actually hurt. I don't think reading it will be much easier and I hope after you read this chapter, you don't all hate me. Please protect yourselves. Heed the tags and warnings. I put the warnings in the endnotes so to avoid spoilers, but if you're nervous about proceeding, please make sure to check them out first and make sure you can handle them.

Hopefully, you guys like this chapter...despite it's subject matter and probably mistakes because it's the middle of the night and I'm still editing and I'm probably bound to miss something.

Please let me know what you think in the comments, I'd really appreciate it as always and could do for some cheering up! Thanks friends 3

...

Robert slides his palms over Bill's cheeks and thumbs over the crest of his chin. "Look at me."

Bill forces his brain to react, reluctantly peering up. Robert fixates on him, gasping into a sinful grin like the sight of Bill is overwhelming. He exerts more pressure into his grip and holds Bill ruthlessly in place, thrusting deeper into his throat. Bill gags. Reflexively, he leans back, or at least tries too, but Robert knots his fingers into the hair at the back of Bill's neck and harnesses him in place.

His eyes are leaky and red. He's practically frothing at the mouth,

desperately craving air but Robert doesn't let up. Every passing second is a second that Bill gets closer to passing out. It's becoming achingly clear; Bill is going to have to force his own reprieve.

He gags again, a reflex action that comes with the realization of what he knows he has to do. It's one thing to just kneel and take everything Robert gives him. It's another to become an active participant in his own abuse.

But Bill needs to get a handle on the situation and fast, because if he doesn't he's going to die right here, sucking off a maniac. And he's not about to let that be the way he goes.

So, he does something that makes him hate himself. He flicks his tongue over the slit of Robert's cock. Robert replies with a stony, wanton groan that's flung from his lips.

It's indication enough for Bill. He's drawing him disgustingly closer.

Bill levels his tongue over the ridge of Robert's shaft, working his way up and circling over his head.

"Billy..." Robert pants, sounding haggard, "you...playing games?" He gnaws his lip, rock-hard in Bill's mouth. Bill can taste the man's dribbling pre-cum on his tongue. It's salty and bitter. Robert runs an unsteady hand through Bill's hair and fists a chunk of strands, tugging hard. His nerves are jerking with every damning move Bill makes.

It's now or never Bill thinks, hollowing out his cheeks, and sucking.

That does it.

Robert drops his chin and his eyes blow wide. He looks more vulnerable than Bill has ever seen him and Bill's far from proud of himself, though maybe he is a little smug. Robert's got this relentless passion for power and yet there's a small flicker of self-satisfaction in knowing no matter how compromising a position Robert has him in, Bill's somehow holding all the cards here.

He's got the clout to take some of that power back.

Though, it only lasts a split second, before Robert realizes he's losing

his upper hand and his pupils swell, inky and enraged.

The next thing Bill knows, Robert cups the back of his neck and forces Bill down on him harder. Bill gags again. His throat convulses, rejecting the bulge of flesh being forced upon him. It's the sight and sounds that he makes, choking on Robert's cock and Bill's own pitiable moans—that he thinks, throws Robert over the edge.

Robert releases into a guttural and crude swear, "Fuuuuuck!" and spills into Bill's mouth, shooting strings of cum into the back of his throat and coating his windpipe with the sticky seed.

Bill sputters and keeps swallowing again and again.

He's never gotten used to that feeling.

Robert keeps him still, riding out for every brutal second until his bristling orgasm has subsided. Then he harshly shoves Bill off of him.

Bill folds like a pretzel. His skinny legs tangle beneath him and his elbows painfully smack the concrete floor. His back collides into someone's legs. Networks of coughs keep escaping him but somehow he's able to force the thick fluid down his throat.

"Bill!"

The person whose legs he hit crouches down and hugs him from behind. Bill feels tufts of blond curls tickling the side of his neck. Stan.

"We're right here." Stan whispers to him, "right here Bill." His words are right by Bill's ear and like a record player with the needle jammed—he plays a soothing verse on repeat.

If only for that fleeting moment, Bill's nerves settle. He looks at Stan and his debauched lips quirk into a grateful crescent moon.

Richie and Eddie crouch beside them. Richie cups his cheek and his gaze is turned the other way.

"Damn it Bill!" Richie says to him, "always with the fucking hero complex."

His hands are shaking as he fusses with his shirtsleeve. Richie pulls the fabric over his knuckle and pinches it between his fingers. He holds Bill's face with one hand and wipes under the swollen hollow of Bill's eyes with the other, taking his tears. He draws the fabric down his face and pauses at his lips. Richie looks at Bill sadly before dabbing the sullied corner of his chin.

Eddie squeezes his knee and Bill looks at him over Richie's shoulder. There's a determined message in his hooded eyes, 'this changes nothing.'

They're undoubtedly worse off not distancing themselves from him, but Bill can't deny how much he needs this right now. The shelter he feels being wrapped up in his friends' arms, it's like they're an umbrella and Robert's the typhoon bearing down on him. But together they haven't buckled. Not yet.

Robert floats his way toward them and his focus lands back on Bill. "Well damn Billy Boy," he says, tucking himself into his jeans and raking a hand through his sweaty hair. "I've gotta' hand it to you. That was one hell of an apology."

Bill flushes and chews the inside of his cheek, trying to distract the shame coursing through him. But Robert loves making him squirm. He sighs in such a pleased and enduring way, it's like the mere memory of what's just happened is getting him hard again. "But I don't think an apology is going to cut it, do you?"

Bill isn't naïve. He never fooled himself into believing Robert would be through with him so quickly, satiated by a simple blowjob. There's undoubtedly a larger plan in store, and he's just biding his time for the big unveil.

"Ju-just leave them out of th-this," Bill dares to speak up, he keeps his tone cold, levelled but there's desperation there all the same, "they've du-done nothing wrong."

His body is surging with electric nerves. He wonders if his friends can sense the dread permeating off him, feel the cold sweat sweeping through every pore, like he's wallowing in his own Robert induced anxiety sauna.

He imagines himself fading away, bits and pieces of his soul escaping in plumes of vapour—just nothingness.

"Well alrighty then," Robert claps his hands together and licks his lips. He sounds gruff as he orders Bill, "Get up."

Bill inhales deeply, trying and failing miserably to calm his unsteady heartbeat. He nods and makes a move to stand but instantly feels six protective hands tighten their hold on him. His friends force him back in place, unwilling to let him go. Ever since his first night, they've learned to never let Bill walk straight into Robert's nasty clutches again. If Robert wants him, he's going to have to pry Bill out of their arms.

But that's not what Bill wants, because, he knows what comes next—the same old song and dance that winds up with someone he loves getting hurt and he's so furious with himself, so beyond comprehension because he can't believe this keeps on happening again and again!

"Guys pu-please..." Bill tries under his breath.

"Shut up," Richie grits back narrowing his eyes at Robert with an authority that throws Bill, "just stay fucking put Denbrough."

"Ain't this cute!" Robert croons. He holds his hands behind his back and tilts his head, appraising them. "But you should know by now, this doesn't have to be difficult for all of you."

He arches his top half—a whole 90 degrees, so his face is near them. They get smaller, huddling as close as they can like they're trying to suffocate the space between them. "Tonight, I just want to play with Billy."

"You ca-can't have him," Eddie squeaks out, hooking his arm into Richie's arm, like he needs and anchor. His other hand is still on Bill's knee and he's squeezing down hard.

"Oh?" Robert pouts mockingly, "But...I've already used this once today —"

Robert drops his hand forward, brandishing the same knife from

yesterday. The boys inhale at the sight of it. They hold Bill harder. It's small, serrated butchers knife that looks menacing and certainly sharp enough to slice through flesh like butter. The blade glistens with smears of crimson blood.

Bill knows right away that it can't be his blood. It looks too...fresh. A not so good feeling bristles inside him; hooked by Robert last words "used this once today. His stomach rolls painfully and he's certain he doesn't want to know what that means.

Robert pokes the blade into his forefinger, twisting it amusingly. It's like he wants someone to provoke him and he smiles maniacally whilst addresses the other Losers directly, "you boys really gonna' fight me on this?"

"They won't!" Bill stutters out before they've got the chance to say anything else. He tries shaking free of his friends, but they keep firm. "They're not gonna' fff-fight!"

His eyes dart frantically between them. Bill looks at Eddie and pleads with him, "you're nu-not, okay?"

Eddie bites his lip guiltily, "Bill..." he mutters, and it's how he says Bill's name like an apology that makes Bill realize that for once Eddie isn't going to listen to him.

Bill's eyes widen in disbelief. He turns on Richie, "I du-don't want you too Rrr-Rich. Do you hear me, I don't want th-this!"

Richie tenses his jaw and looks pained, "It doesn't matter Bill."

"Ffff-fuck this!" Bill snaps at them. He, feels like he's losing his mind. He looks at Stan with a blazing expression. He grabs Stan's arm and squeezes it piteously, "Stan pu-please you can't. I need you sss-safe."

Tears pool in Stan's eyes. He breaks their gaze and looks at the floor, like he can't bear to go against Bill. "I promised," he whispers.

This isn't happening right now.

Bill looks up and Robert is demented, wild eyed and aching to get down to business. He shakes his head at them, almost scoldingly and

shrugs, "Well, if that's how it's going to be...

"Nu-no! Mmm-Mr Gray don't—" Bill holds up a bruised hand to try and...what? He doesn't even know. Give him pause? Slow him down? Either way, it's no use because there's no stopping Robert now.

Robert snags Bill's wrist and wrenches him to his feet. Every part of Bill cries out in protest and he lets out a yelp of surprise. His friends are up in an instant. Stan hugs Bill's waist and pulls as hard as he can, trying to wrench him out of Robert's grip. Richie is clawing at Robert's hand and Eddie is smacking Robert with his good arm, again and again.

Bill is being tugged this way and that. His friends are fighting with flailing limbs and vehement cries and everything blurs together in his brain like he's being jostled on some kind of spinny ride.

It all happens too fast.

Robert juts his elbow into Eddie throat. Eddie coughs and clutches his neck. He jabs left with the blade, slicing Stan's hand. Reflexively, Stan hisses and let's Bill go. He holds his gashed palm against his chest. Richie's the only one who's still got a hold on them and he's refusing to let go, "Get off you creepy clowny fuck!"

Robert growls and swipes for him, looking more angered than ever.

Suddenly there's blood—a lot of blood. Drops are splattered all over Bill's arm, on Robert's hands and on the concrete floor. It's like time stops for that moment.

Bill breathes and his eyes dart to Richie and oh God no...

Richie stumbles back staggered. His glasses are on the floor. He looks up, mouth ajar and panting. He clutches one eye and squints up at Bill's with the other. Blood seeps through his fingers, rivulets of red leaking down one side of his face.

Bill looks on, horrified. His lips tremble, "Rrr-Rich..."

Maybe it's the adrenaline catching up to him or the increasing blood loss, but it's like Richie forget's he has feet because he stumbles and

then falls on his ass.

"RICHIE!"

Bill tries running to him but Robert lurches him right back. He looks furiously at Robert and pounds his fist into the man's chest. "What the fff-fuck did you do!?"

Eddie falls to Richie's side, crying and cradling his face, "Jesus, Richie. Fuck! Fuck!"

Richie gasps and groans on the floor. He looks like he's ready to faint, his eyelids puttering. "Eds I ca-can't see..." he musters dazedly.

"Shhh don't talk," Eddie strokes his hair, "you're okay. You'll be okay, don't worry..."

Bill keeps trying to break free, thrashing in Robert's grip. Robert pulls Bill roughly against him. He turns him around, holding Bill against his chest. He points the knife at Richie "See what you did!"

"Nu-no..." Bill shakes his head, "Pu-please, he's hurt. Yu-you can't la-leave him like that. You have to help him!"

"Oh no, I don't think I do." Robert brings the blade up, poking it against Bill's neck.

"DON'T!" Stan yells, taking a step toward them but Robert pushes the blade deeper into Bill's skin, nicking him. Bill gulps against the pressure. A drop of blood trickles down his neck. It stops Stan in his tracks. He looks at Bill, scared and unsure.

Robert appraises Stan, intrigued. "Deciding to suddenly grow a pair, eh Stanny?" He turns his face into Bill's and nuzzles Bill's face with his nose. "Or..." he sends a knowing sidelong glance at Stan. "Is it just that we share the same favourite?"

Stan blushes and bites down on his quivering lip. "Just don't hurt him pu-please..."

"Not yet," Robert assures, "See, Billy and I are just getting started." He waves the knife at Stan with a smirk, "so go on, take a seat, hmm?"

Let's get this ball rolling."

"It's okay Stan," Bill tells him, trying to keep his tone measured, "ju-just listen to what he says."

Stan looks torn but eventually relents. He backs up slowly to where Eddie and Richie are and kneels beside them. The three of them look up at him, Richie as best he can, and they're all a beaten mess.

Robert coils his arm around Bill's chest and holds Bill's face. "They're all going to float for me, Billy." His lips are right next to Bill's ear and what he says next, it's like his world stops spinning, "Just like Georgie did."

The pain that comes next...it's worse than anything he's ever felt. Worse than every horrific act Robert's ever forced him into. Worse than any nightmare he can't wake up from. A poisonous sorrow metastasizes through him and tears him apart from the inside out. His heart feels like it's going to explode in his chest and a sickening, debilitating darkness creeps into every crack of bone, every muscle and nerve and lays waste. He comes undone and loses any strength he has left. His legs buckle and he collapses, falling through Robert's arms and onto the floor.

Robert laughs clamorously, manhandling him onto his back. He slams his hands onto the concrete beside Bill's face and drools down at him.

"He missed you Billy. Oh so much!" Robert looks up, his gaze lands on something behind Bill. Bill arches his neck and follows his gaze and instantly wishes he hadn't because Robert is staring past him, right at the black duffle. "Of course I had to bring him along for a very special reunion!"

"Nu-no...no...NO!" Everything goes fuzzy. His ears are a shudder of white noise. His vision is dappled with blinding black spots. He hyperventilates and shakes his head, frantic, floundering in Robert's grip. "NO YOU DIDN'T...NU-NOT HIM—" He sobs like ocean tides cresting wildly on a haunted beach. "TELL MMM-ME YOU FFF-FUCKING DIDN'T!"

Robert gets off him and pulls Bill across the floor to where the bag

sits. He throws Bill before it. Now close enough, Bill can make out the putrid smell of something dead, rotting, inside. He retches and swallows down bile.

"Open it!" Robert orders him.

Bill clenches his fist, digging his nails into his palm till he bleeds. Tears leak from his eyes and his breathing hitches, "I ca-can't. Don't mmm-make me, pu-please—"

The Losers lose their minds.

"HOW COULD YOU?" Richie roars past his own pain, "YOU SICK FUCKER!"

"DON'T DO THIS TO HIM!" Eddie cries.

Stan is begging, "JUST LEAVE HIM ALONE!"

The Losers clamour to their feet and Robert's fiery gaze snaps up, "STAY PUT BOYS!" He grabs a handful of Bill's hair and forces his head back.

Robert presses the blade against his neck, "Or we're going to be seeing a lot of Billy's insides on the outside. You hear me?"

His friends look wrathful and tear-stained but they don't dare move. They're at war with themselves and have no clue what to do.

"There we go!" Robert says sounding positively tickled pink, "Now! Let's all watch Billy Boy open the gift I brought, especially for him."

Robert jostles him forward. He keeps the point of the knife pressed to the back of Bill's neck, "Do it." he spits.

...

He's sweating liquid fear. Bill's hand tremble furiously, but somehow he musters the guts to unzip the flap and turn it over.

And it's worse than Bill ever imagined—a brutal display that far outranks any gruesome horror movie he's ever seen. What he finds in

the bag is a triage of festering little limbs. The bloated, dismembered remains of a hapless child. It's all splintered bone, torn muscle and contorted organs, soaked everywhere in inky black blood.

Bill stares into the bag in abject horror. He can't even bring himself to scream, because a part of him is still clutching onto the feeble belief that this really isn't Georgie.

'No', he tells himself. There's no way his adventurous, adorable, funny, never hurt a fly in his life and probably never would, baby brother could be the same mutilated, puzzle of a broken corpse that Robert's flaunting before him.

Except, beneath all the sickening gore, Bill's eyes catch a trace of yellow and his stomach convulses as the realization sets in and flashes of Georgie in his yellow rain slicker flood Bill's mind.

Georgie skipping down Jackson Street in his rain boots.

Georgie laughing with pure joy as he stomps into puddles.

Georgie twirling around in their yard, arms outstretched and tongue out trying to catch raindrops.

In the mess of it all, his eyes zero in on the remains of a severed arm. Tiny pale fingers curl out from beneath a yellow jacket sleeve. Bill bites his lip and dares to reach into the bag, praying to God that he's wrong.

Not you. Not you. Not you.

He swallows, petrified, and turns the cuff over.

And there it is, a name embroidered into to hem of the sleeve especially by his mother that reads: 'Property of Georgie E. Denbrough.'

Bill gasps and drops the hem, kicking away from the bag. He slams into Robert's legs and shakes his head, over and over because this isn't real. It's not! It's just another one of Robert's tricks. That's not Georgie. It can't be, because Ben promised him. He promised to look after Georgie. He promised to get him past all this!

But there's blood on his hands—sticky and wet—and deep down in Bill's heart he knows...

It was nothing but a dream. A silly fucking fantasy! How could he be so stupid? To believe Ben might have actually heard him. That'd he be able to keep Georgie safe when Bill couldn't even do that his fucking self!

Gone. Gone. Gone.

Robert crouches and lays a hand on Bill's shoulder. He squeezes, "I nearly forgot!" he fishes into his pocket and pulls out a crumpled wad of paper, wet with mud and splattered in spots of red. Robert shakes it out and Bill's heart lurches. The paper unravels and somehow the wax did it's job, maintaining some of the boat's keen edges and sharp folds. Bill recognizes it instantly.

The S.S Georgie.

...

Bill could feel the comforting weight of his baby brother leaning onto his shoulder as he swept the finishing brush across the last strip of folded paper. Georgie peered over his shoulder, watching Bill work his magic a little mesmerized because that's just how it was with them. He thought Bill hung the moon and everything he did, no matter how big or small was considered incredible in Georgie's eyes.

The wax clung to Bill's fingertips, as he pinched the corners of the small paper boat together. He held it up, and smirked. His features caught in the glimmer of orange light, cast softly from the lamp sitting atop his desk.

"Alright here you go." He said dropping the brush and turning to face Georgie. His brother stepped back and rocked on his heels in anticipation. "Sh-sh-she's all ready Captain."

"She?" Georgie asked, blinking at him curiously.

"You always call bu-bu-boats she," Bill explained, handing the small boat over. "Happy Bu-birthday bu-bud."

Georgie took the boat, giving it a once over and looking it up and down as

he inspected.

Bill scratched the back of his neck nervously, "I know it's not mmm-much —"

He didn't even finish the sentence because the next thing Bill knew, Georgie was pouncing on him. He wrapped his arms around Bill's neck, and Bill pulled him in. His fingers clung to the soft fabric of Georgie's sweatshirt as the little boy held him tightly. Effectively squeezing all the wind out of him, "Thanks Billy, it's perfect. Really it is!"

Bill sighed in relief, feeling much better now. He'd been worried Georgie would be disappointed with his gift. He couldn't afford the good stuff. No toy trucks or BB guns or action figures under his allowance, but he did his best with the only tools he had. His own two hands. Georgie, being the saint of a little brother that he was, didn't even complain. He just seemed so overjoyed at the prospect of them sailing the boat together.

Bill was excited too. He could picture it already, the two of em' flying down Jackson, trying to keep pace with the small boat as it floated down a flooded curb. He could hardly wait.

Georgie let go finally, and stepped back. He glanced down at the boat. "She," he repeated, with a proud smile that warmed Bill's heart and Bill thought, 'I wish I could keep you like this. Always this happy. Forever.'

"I wanna' sail her right now! Let's go Billy!"

Georgie did a little hop on his toes and made a break for the bedroom door but Bill caught his arm, tugging him back with a little chuckle. "Hey hey, sss-slow your rrr-rolls Fff-Flash. It's not even rrr-raining today. And besides, mom says you have to start getting rrr-ready for the party—"

Georgie groaned, twisting his expression into a pout, "But I don't wanna! Mama's making me wear a bow tie." He stuck a finger into his mouth and pretended to gag. "I'll look like a goof."

"In all fff-fairness, you are kind of a goof."

"Hey!"

"I'm kidding, ch-chill out." He nudged Georgie's sneaker with his toe, a

little encouraging kick in the pants, "You look fff-fine in a bow tie ja-Georgie."

"Easy for you to say, Mama doesn't dress you anymore."

"Bu-but they'll be a clown. You like clowns."

"Richie doesn't like clowns."

Bill rolled his eyes. Since when did Richie become the new poster role model?

"There's nu-nothing wrong with clowns Georgie. Clowns are nice."

And maybe a little freaky. But Bill wasn't about to admit that.

"But I wanna' go sailing..."

"We will bu-buddy, just not ta-today."

"When?"

"The next big thunder sss-sst-storm, it's going to be all us."

"Swear it?" Georgie held out his little pinky and tilted his head expectantly. Bill smiled and nodded. "Swear it," he echoed curling his pinky around Georgie's.

It was an oath he thought he'd never ever break.

...

Robert harbours the boat like a hostage and Bill grabs for it, desperate and teary eyed, because he needs it back! It doesn't belong with Robert. It looks wrong in his greedy hands. But Robert's faster than him, he crumples the boat up again, and pockets it in his jeans.

"No, no Billy. I think I'll hold onto this."

"It's nu-not yours..." Bill chokes out, "nu-not yours!"

"It is now kiddo. My little keepsake from Georgie, among other things." He winks sinisterly, "I had my fun with him first."

A wave of nausea hits him instantly and his stomach contracts painfully. Bill doesn't try and fight the sick this time. He pukes his guts out, violently onto the cellar floor. He pukes until there's nothing left. And until he's heaving on stale air, clutching his stomach and falling exhaustingly onto his side. The concrete is cold on his bare cheek.

Georgie. Georgie. Georgie.

He's dead.

Jesus Christ.

His little brother is actually dead and Bill's didn't even get to say good-bye. They'll never get the chance to sail the S.S Georgie together. Robert Gray has stolen the opportunity from them, the same way he steals everything else. By tearing it away. Sullyng it. Ruining it.

"Where I go you go." he hears his words coming back to haunt him.

He didn't mean like this. Never this!

His friends are calling out to him. Things like "Bill! We're so sorry! Fuck! Shit! This can't be happening! It'll be okay! Oh god! Oh god! Not your fault! He loved you so much! Don't listen to him!"

But Bill is inconsolable. He curls into a ball, holds his knees and shakes on the floor. He was naive to believe Robert had his limits—that his heinousness was bound to the cellar and the cellar alone. How could he have been so reckless? He's the one who pushed Robert over the edge. The one who challenged him time and again and now...now Georgie paid his price.

Oh Georgie.

He thinks of Georgie in that bag and the sickening display of violence and ruthlessness.

What did Robert do to him? Did he do it quickly? Did Georgie suffer?

He can hear his baby brother's phantom screams ringing in his ears

and *he can't...he doesn't want to imagine it—*

Robert cackles like the crazed maniac he is. He clutches Bill's arm like a manacle and yanks him off the floor. He's got a firm hold on Bill, supporting his buckling limbs because Bill can't even hold himself upright.

Somehow Richie is stumbling across the room. He looks utterly pitiful, still holding his eye and swaying on his feet. "I'll go!" he offers, desperately pushing himself between them and Bill can't find the words to argue. Yet again, he's letting down someone he loves.

"JUST TAKE ME DAMNIT!" Richie grabs onto Robert's shirt and shakes him with everything he has.

Robert snarls and juts the knife out, a threatening inch from Richie's face, "You've been a real thorn in my side lately, you know that?" He dances the blade near Richie's mouth, "Maybe I try cutting your tongue out next hmm? Let's see how cocky you are then."

With his one good eye, Richie looks down at the blade and back up at Robert. He gulps. "You don't need him." he entreats, "I'll do it. Whatever you want."

"What I want..." Robert smirks evilly, and then he's pushing Richie away from them. He pulls Bill closer and in a swift aggressive gesture, hoists Bill over his shoulder like a Viking would a thrall. And Bill...he just let's it happen.

"...Is for you boys to say your bye-byes to Billy Boy. You won't be seeing him for a long time."

"NO—" Eddie screams and lunges at Robert. Stan acts quick, catching him around the waist before Eddie gets far enough to put himself in danger. Eddie frantically kicks out in his arms, "Don't you dare fucking hurt him!"

Robert chuckles mirthlessly. "But we have such fun together, don't we Billy Boy?" Bill whimpers when Robert smacks him hard on the ass, taunting the others. "Now boys, last chance. Tell your friend how much you're going to miss him."

Their sobs braid together, a tangled display of heart-rending despair.

Eddie let's out a miserable cry of denial, "Oh god no Bill! Bill!"

Richie keeps spilling out desperate pleas, "Take me! Take me! I said I'll go! Please!"

"Bill I..." Stan breaks on his words, and with a shaken breath tells him, "we love you."

...

He isn't scared. Not yet. He knows he should be. But even as Robert climbs them up the three stories to his bedroom—too that horrible, carnal chamber of debauchery, it all still feels like some strange fever dream and he can't focus on anything beyond the misery of losing Georgie.

Not Robert's painful grip roughly needing his inner thigh over his jeans.

Not the vile, heavy breaths of anticipation that wheeze from Robert's lips as he takes the steps two at time, because he can't get Bill up there fast enough.

Not even the musty smell of bed sheets or the feel of his sore body landing with a thud when Robert throws him down onto the mattress.

Nothing is enough to snap Bill out of it.

Bill is stricken; his sobs are heavy and hitching. He turns on his side and curls himself into a fetal position, wanting to hide from the agony of it all. But Robert is relentless.

"Buck up Billy!" Bill can hear a belt buckle unfastening and the sound of fabric being toed to the ground. "I'd thought you'd be happier seeing little Georgie after all this time!" He chortles, deep in his throat, "But I guess it wasn't the way you'd hoped was it?"

"Shh-shut up." Bill squirms on the mattress and covers his ears, "Shh-shut up!"

"He was so desperate to see you. He'd have done anything..."

"He was ju-just a kid...just...just..."

"So naive. Trusting. Innocent." Each word spills from his lips sounding dirty, like a bad word. "It was precious, how he screamed your name. Begged for you even then—"

"Sss-stop!" Bill begs, "Stop pu-please!" He fists his hair and tugs on the strands till it hurts, "how cu-could you—"

"Not me Billy." Robert clutches his ankle and in one violent tug, drags Bill down into the centre of the mattress. He flips Bill on his back and stands at the foot of the bed, naked and ginning menacingly down on him. "If you had just been a good boy, he'd still be skipping merrily right now."

It's not just the sight of Robert looming over him, entirely lean, veiny muscles and rigid curves. Sweaty and breathing hard, already ready to go. It's the cruel words he's using that torture Bill. "You're fault Billy! All you're fault!"

An explosion of shame and crippling guilt erupts inside him. He's been raped before. Used and abused countless times. But today, this time is the one time Bill actually feels like he deserves it.

Robert leaps onto the bed all excitedly. He's giggling like a child, getting ready to tinker with his most favourite toy. He mounts Bill, his knees on either side of Bill's hips and grabs Bill's wrists with a bruising grip, slamming his hands down above his head. Robert is entirely stretched out around him. He bears down on Bill, dragging his mouth up Bill's chest, jutting his tongue past his lips.

Bill screws his eyes shut. He hates the feeling of Robert's hot mouth trailing up his body. His hardness presses against Bill's stomach. When Robert get's there, he noses into the crook of Bill's neck and inhales deeply. "You always smell so yummy. Oh but you taste..." and then with entitled hunger, he licks his fat tongue over Bill's cheek, lapping up his tears, "...God you taste even better."

Bill turns his face away, and whimpers. Trembling with the effort to

contain himself. He knows he should be struggling. Doing something, anything to stave Robert off. But he's got no might in him left at all. He knows it will only be worse for him if he fights and he's so sad. So spent. He just wants this to be over with.

Robert kneels up, and Bill feels him fumbling to pop open the button on Bill's jeans and unzip him. The man curls his fingers into Bill's belt loops and practically tears his jeans off in one foul swoop, pulling them down and off his legs.

He's laid bare and completely at Robert's mercy now.

Bill flinches when Robert touches a cold palm to his leg, stroking slowly over Bill's thigh. His sharp nails scoring into his skin. He wants to keep his eyes shut but Robert's having none of that.

"Oh no no Billy, I can't have you hiding those baby blues on me now!" He runs his fingertips teasingly along Bill's inner thighs with bogus clemency and then in a split-second comes the shift, and he's clutches Bill roughly between the legs with a painfully violent grip, squeezing him hard.

Bill yelps and his eyes spring open. He looks up at Robert, his gaze begging and bloodshot. Robert wraps his other hand around Bill's throat and he chokes on a sob. His atoms apple bobs under Robert's palm. His ears ring from the pressure.

"That's more like it," Robert mutters, dipping his thumb into the hollow of Bill's pulse point and leaning his face close. "You have no idea..." Robert pants into his face, "how long I've craved you exactly like this."

He smashes his painted lips into Bill's mouth and kisses him roughly. It's messy and wet and full of teeth. Bill let's out a feeble groan of discomfort against Robert's lips.

Robert licks his tongue into Bill's mouth, easing up on his hold and starting to stroke Bill instead. This is always the worse part—those moments of mock intimacy, when Bill keens. His body is somehow tricked into working against him. He can feel himself getting hard, his hips arching up and his dick swelling into the friction of Robert's

large palm.

Robert breaks their kiss but doesn't move away. "You're going to watch me," he purrs darkly, "Just like this Billy." He let's go of Bill's throat and Bill gasps, his breathing raddled. "If I catch those oh so pretty eyes closed for a even a second, I'll slice off your lids, understand?"

Robert snags his hair as a warning, jerking a handful of strands till Bill is forced to nod. Robert smiles disgustingly down on him, "So willing. All for me."

His words make Bill cry even harder.

Robert stops stroking him so he can brings his hand up to his mouth and spit onto his fingers. It seems like a pointless gesture. He barely takes a minute to get Bill ready before he's spreading Bill apart and settling himself between his raised legs. Whatever little preparation there was, it was undoubtedly more for Robert than for Bill anyway. Bill's no doubt about that, because Robert wants this punishment to be felt—every vicious moment of it.

He locks eyes with Robert, and sees the man who took so much from him—an insatiable, soulless shell of a human staring back. Bill's body goes frigid and scorches at the same time. A ruinous, dark flame fuels in his heart and rages down his spine. Robert snaps his hips, thrusting brutally into Bill—tearing him apart and planting his perverse evil, somewhere deep inside. This is going to stay with Bill forever. Besmirch him. He'll take and take and leave Bill completely hollow. Incomplete. Now missing one half of himself.

The best half.

All of Bill's defences are robbed away. He's shackled by grief and a broken sound of utter heartbreak finally escapes him. It's the kind of scream only someone who's suffered time and again and now lost any and all hope can make. The kind of scream that could split the world in half if that was possible. The capacity of it shudders through the derelict old home, echoing between floorboards and finding its way back to the cellar. Into the ears of his mourning friends. Rendering all four boys in the very same state of anguish.

...

He's alone in the cellar and surely that means this is a nightmare, because Bill can't imagine anything scarier than being alone.

It's cold and flooded down here. Drops of silver are beading down from ceiling and icy water laps at his feet. It soaks through his jeans and clamps down on his ankles, nipping his thin skin.

Drip. Drop. Drip. Drop. Drip. Drop.

Ripples catch light from fissures in the rafters and casts sapphire reflections on the walls. It's like rainbows of shattered glass dancing on crumbling concrete.

Kind of pretty.

Bill can't move a muscle, but he doesn't have too, because something...someone moves first.

A little dash of yellow appears from nowhere, splashing through the water and racing past him. The sudden motion startles Bill and he gasps. His eyes follow fast, catching a boy huddling, shyly, behind an old rusted shelving unit. He stays there. His little hood is up and he's got his face buried in his knees. Hiding away.

Bill's heart skips a thousand beats in his chest. "Georgie?"

Georgie looks up slowly, looking scared. His cheeks are pale and wet with tears, "Bill..."

Bill is trembling.

"Yeah...yeah it's me."

Georgie slowly rises to his feet. Tiny feet make tiny steps toward him and he stops just barely out of Bill's reach. It's torture, not being able to reach out and touch him.

All he has to hold onto is this hallow vision of Georgie standing before him, and he's honestly not sure whether to believe his eyes or not. Bill never thought he'd see his brother again. Not in this lifetime, anyway.

Which means, is he dead? Is this?...not heaven. Never a place like this. But maybe this is his punishment. Somewhere eternal, for him to wallow and be reminded how terribly he let Georgie down.

He can't even be happy seeing him. Not when Georgie is so clearly unhappy. So crestfallen and void and it makes everything about this feel wrong.

"Where were you?" Georgie whimpers, "I waited every day but you didn't come home."

"I wished to come home mmm-more than anything." Bill whispers. His breathing catches in his chest and stutters in his throat. "To be with you, and mom and dad. I mmm-missed you all so much."

"You swore it." Georgie reaches into his pocket and pulls out the S.S. Georgie. This boat looks new, like when Bill first made it. Nothing like the messy, disintegrating mess of paper Robert presented to him earlier. "Swore we'd go sailing..."

"I wanted to..." Bill stares down at him, "I would have done whatever it took to get back to you—"

Georgie looks up with profound sadness in his doe eyes. "But he got to me first."

Bill swallows a lump.

"The clown...he said he knew where you were...said I could be the one to save you..."

"I'm so sss-sorry...sorry he lied."

"No Billy." Georgie says, and something shifts in his tone—darkening into something sinister. He snarls, "You lied."

"Georgie—"

"You lied and I died..."

"No...no...I didn't mmm-mean too—"

"You lied and I died..."

"You weren't sss-supposed to get hurt!"

"YOU LIED AND I DIED!" Georgie gurgles and screams. Bill blinks and everything about Georgie is changed. His eyes cloud over. His complexion turns grey and slimy pustules swell up and burst under his skin. He starts peeling apart, rotting from the inside out. He's crying and spitting bloody, black ink but grinning at Bill through his ruined rain hood.

Bill is paralyzed by fear.

He wants to run but feels two white gloved hands, slither up onto his shoulders, keeping him there. He hears jester bells jangling behind him and a reedy giggle, teasing the back of his neck.

Pennywise

Georgie's body collapses into itself. His limbs fold and snap with a horribly, sickening noise. The corpse falls limply, splashing down into the water, dead.

And Bill...Bill is still trapped there, staring into the space where his brother one stood and finding only a crumpled, ghostly corpse. He waits and wishes for the clown to do away with him too. Just finish it, once and for all.

Pennywise licks his lips, smacking his saliva hungrily right by Bill's ear, "Not yet," he taunts.

Bill feels his heart break for a second time.

"Wakey-wakey Billy." Pennywise sings to him. "Wake up. Waaaake up..."

...

"Wake up."

Bill gasps awake and blinks white dots into the darkness. He can't see a thing except for the shadowed silhouettes of Robert's friends, standing guard in the room. It must be the middle of the night. Bill can still hear crickets chirping outside.

Robert is breathing heavy beside him.

Bill's not entirely sure he's awake, not until he feels Robert's palm slide onto his stomach, caressing him and playing near his waist where the sheet is covering them both. He inhales a staggered breath when Robert leans in and presses his lips to Bill's neck.

"Were you having a bad dream Billy?" He asks with mock concern, his tone is deceptively soft and needling.

Bill doesn't answer and Robert starts meandering his fingertips lower, dancing them down, down, down, finding his way back between Bill's legs.

"Was it the boogyman?"

Worse.

"Want me to make you feel better, don't you Billy?"

Robert starts sucking on his neck. Nipping at his collarbone. Touching Bill how he likes.

It's no matter that he's still sore. Still healing. Still has blood between his legs that hasn't even dried yet...because Robert is ready and that means Bill has to be too.

"Say it."

No.

"Say it!" Robert growls.

He closes his eyes and blinks out fresh tears. Under cover of darkness, he's grateful there's no way for Robert to take notice. He thinks of George and the justice he deserves. The justice he'll never get because of Bill, and that's why he gives in—for Georgie. Knowing he'll never get the chance to make things right any other way.

"I-I want you...Mmm-Mr. Gray."

Bill feels Robert's smile against his skin.

"Turn over. On your stomach."

He does